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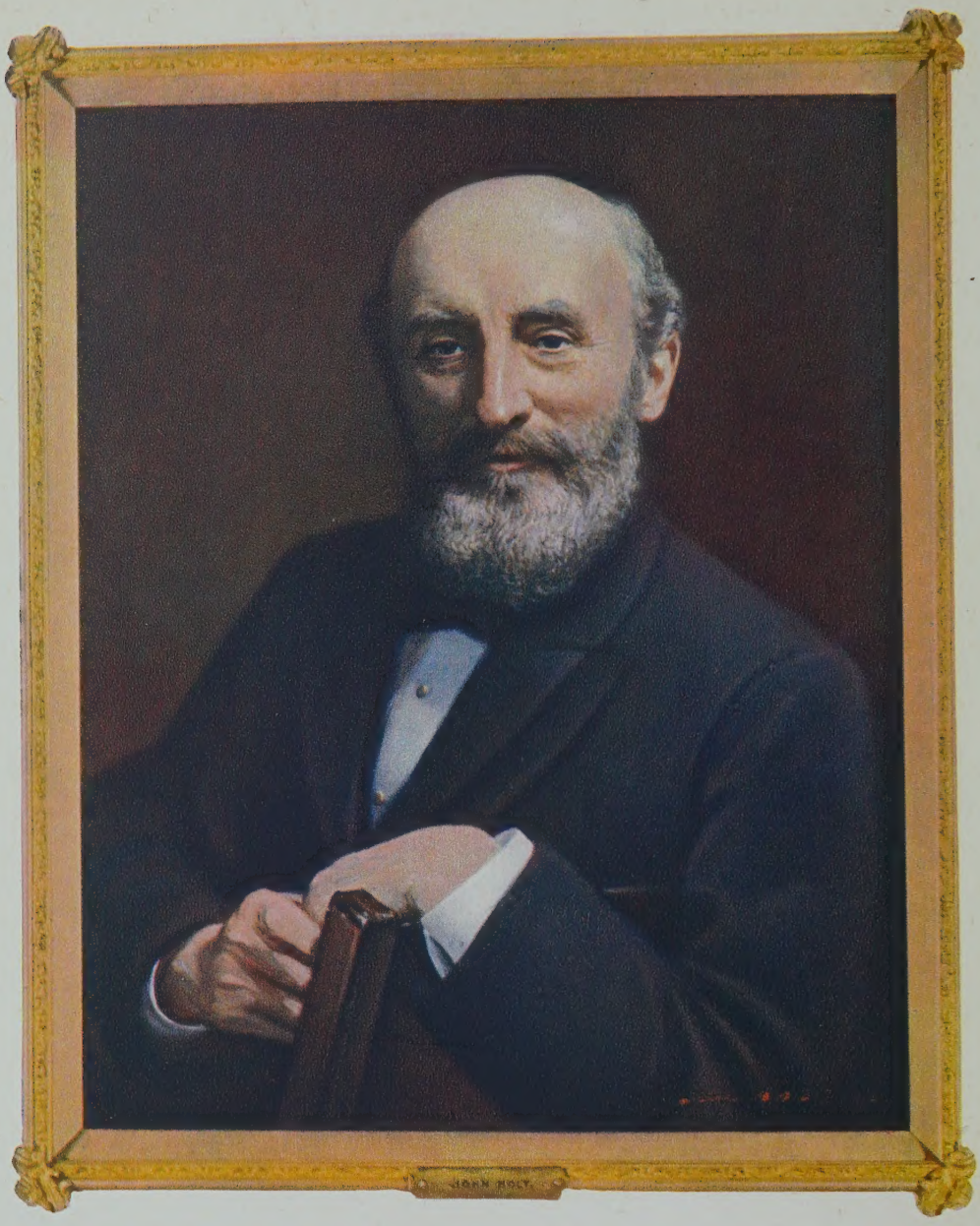

John Holt (1841-1915)

Founder and First Chairman of the Company

MERCHANT ADVENTURE

John Holt & Co. (Liverpool) Ltd

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

SURF-BOATS AT ACCRA: *reproduced by courtesy of Anglo-Scottish Pictures Ltd.* MARKET SCENE AT KANO: *reproduced by courtesy of British Overseas Airways Corporation*

PREFACE

This short preface has only one purpose, and that is to acknowledge the loyal efforts and services of past and present members of the staff of the Company, and its Associates, whether at home or abroad. It is this co-operation which has so greatly contributed to the record of achievement and progress that is written into the pages which follow. It is largely their endeavour over the years that has created, and continues to create, the history and the future of the Company.

PART ONE

The History of John Holt

1

EARLY DAYS OF A MERCHANT ADVENTURER

Young men contemplating a commercial career in West Africa today are rightly advised to rid their minds of any romantic illusions about bartering beads for ivory tusks with tribal chieftains under the palm trees. In the big towns at any rate, the trappings of trade—banking, communications, transport and modern office routines—are not much different from those in any European city. But it is not so long, after all, since bartering under the palm trees was neither an illusion nor, for that matter, particularly romantic but the bread-and-butter reality of West African trade. If the young men are employees of John Holt & Company (Liverpool) Ltd., they might reflect that it was against such a background that the founder of their own firm drove his first bargains.

Many of the remarkable changes in the West African scene during the past hundred years occurred in John Holt's lifetime. The rest have been part of the experience of his sons and grandsons carrying on what has always been essentially a family concern. The name of John Holt, in fact, bridges two sharply distinct phases of West African history. He, himself, during his twelve years on the Coast between 1862 and 1874, played a notable part in the first phase, the 'pioneering' phase, when a handful of unprotected traders dug themselves in along the coastal fringes. When he died in 1915, the second phase was already well established. This was the 'development' phase, when the Crown took over from the traders, pacifying and administering those territories for which a series of international conferences had made it responsible, and opening up the hinterland with railways and roads.

The 'pioneer' phase lasted almost until the turn of the century. The British Government had been much slower than its Continental counterparts in supporting commercial interests in tropical Africa by direct intervention. In 1860 a commercial consulate had been

established in Lokoja, at the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers, only to be abandoned eight years later. This left the entire Niger territory to unorganised and unprotected traders, but in spite of this the curve of West African trade rose sharply. Between 1870 and 1875 its volume doubled, as increasing mechanisation as well as a higher living standard boosted the home demand for palm oil.

The first attempt to organise and unify British trading interests came, in fact, from a trader—Sir George Goldie, sometimes called the Cecil Rhodes of West Africa. In 1886 the group of firms he had brought together was given a Royal Charter and something like a complete administrative system, including a police force, was set up by his company in the Niger territory. By this time, West and Central Africa had become an arena of international politics. Spheres of influence were marked out at European conferences. But it was hard to 'interpret' boundaries in territories which were still largely unmapped and some powers tended to justify their interpretations by military occupation. There were rumours of wars, before a final conference at Paris in 1898 settled the disputed frontiers.

Three years before this, Joseph Chamberlain had become Colonial Secretary and inaugurated a new and positive policy towards these uneasy regions. Goldie's Charter was withdrawn and the Crown took over the administration of what was later to be called Nigeria. Political and economic control was rapidly extended under the dynamic Lord Lugard. Railways bored inland from Lagos and Port Harcourt.

The mechanical development of West Africa during the early twentieth century was only the latest in a series of momentous changes in which John Holt was often personally involved. He had played his own part in the great increase in West African trade which began in the 1860s. He had been caught up in the growing competitive scramble and had suffered from it when international politics took a hand. He had helped to develop trade in important new products—like cocoa, hides, cotton lint, mahogany and groundnuts—alongside the traditional but periodically slumping trade in palm oil and rubber.

When John Holt started in West Africa, palm oil was the staple of Coast trade. Not so very long before that, it had been slavery. Although Britain had abolished slaving in 1807, certain foreign interests continued this lucrative commerce and as late as 1861 (the

year before John Holt made his first trip to West Africa) Lagos was annexed by the British to stop the flow of slaves passing through there from the warring interior.

The palm oil traders lived precarious and isolated lives, trading mostly from hulks in the river-mouths. Business was tough and chancy. An adventurous trader trying to break new territory might well lose his entire stocks—and perhaps his head into the bargain—if the Africans disliked his rate of exchange. Frequent outbreaks of bush warfare brought trade to a standstill for months at a time. Complicated modes of operation had to be worked out with local potentates; their customs and Ju-ju had to be carefully observed. Rituals of 'comey' (locally-imposed duty on all palm oil and kernels exported) and 'dashes' (gratuities for the chiefs and their attendants, mainly in the form of liquid spirits) were involved in most transactions.

The worst hazard of all was disease. The death roll from yellow fever, typhoid fever, dysentery and malaria was enormous. Contemporary letters and documents record fresh deaths almost every day. (It was not until 1897 that Sir Ronald Ross discovered the part played by the female mosquito in transmitting malaria.) Those who escaped still had to face the most virulent competition. This is another feature of Coast life which emerges from letters and records of that time. John Holt survived both of these hazards. That he not only survived but laid the foundations of a business strong enough to weather the worst slump of all after the First World War and to remain one of the very few independent firms in West Africa today is a tribute to his physical toughness, unconquerable spirit and, not least, to a genius for business outstanding even in that heyday of commercial enterprise.

Such qualities ranked him with men like Goldie and Alfred Jones as merchant empire builders. But before he died the name of John Holt was known—though never widely known, for he hated publicity—for more than commercial achievements. In later years he became a staunch champion of African welfare. He was the friend, confidant and consultant of humanitarians like E. D. Morel and the irrepressible Mary Kingsley.

Not the least remarkable part of the story is the fact that John Holt became a 'coaster' as a very young man (he celebrated his twenty-first birthday in the island of Fernando Po) with no capital,

Sold by
J. MAWDSLEY & SON,
4, Castle-street.

This Indenture, Made the first

Day of July in the Year of Our Lord One Thousand Eight Hundred and fifty seven

BETWEEN John Holt of Garthorpe Goole in the County of Lincoln and William Laird of Liverpool in the County of Lancaster Coal Dealer

WITNESSETH, That the said John Holt by his own free will and with the consent of his father Thomas Holt of Garthorpe Goole in the County of Lincoln

doth by these Presents, put, place, and bind himself a covenant Servant or Apprentice to the said William Laird from the Day of the Date hereof, during the Term of Five Years thence next ensuing, and fully to be completed and ended. AND the said John Holt doth covenant, promise, and agree, to and with the said William Laird that he the said Apprentice shall and will faithfully serve his said Master his Secrets keep his lawful Commands gladly obey and do; hurt to his said Master he shall not do, or suffer to be done by others, when it in his power to prevent the same: His Masters Goods he shall not waste or embezzle, the same, give or lend without Leave; Day or Night absent himself from his said Masters Service; nor do any other Act, Matter, or Thing whatsoever, to the Prejudice of his said Master but in all things shall demean and behave himself towards his Master and all his as a faithful Apprentice ought to do. AND the said Thomas Holt doth hereby bind himself to find and provide for the said John Holt good and sufficient Meat Drink Washing Lodging and all Necessary and Proper wearing Apparel of all sorts suitable for such an Apprentice during the aforesaid term of five Years.

IN CONSIDERATION hereof the said William Laird shall and will pay or cause to be paid to the said Apprentice the Wages following viz. Three Pounds for the first Year Twenty five Pounds for the Second Year Thirty Pounds for the third Year Thirty five Pounds for the fourth Year and Fifty Pounds for the fifth and last Year of the said term

doth hereby for himself, his Executors, Administrators, and Assigns, covenant, promise, and agree to teach, inform, and instruct, or cause and procure to be taught, informed, and instructed, the said Apprentice, by the best Ways and Means, he can in the business or occupation of a Coal Dealer

IN WITNESS whereof, the said Parties to these Presents their Hands and Seals interchangeably have put the Day and Year first above written.

Sealed and ~~delivered in~~ signed by the ~~the Presence of Us~~, the said John Holt and John Hall in the presence of B Porter - 74 Price Street Birkenhead

Sealed & signed by the the said Thomas Holt in the presence of J. Brown Tucker by Goole Yorkshire.

W. Laird

John Holt

Thomas Holt

Indenture between John Holt and William Laird

no family or business connections to help him and no more knowledge either of West Africa or of business generally than could be acquired by a Liverpool coal-dealer's clerk who had been to night school and public libraries. He was born, on the 31st October 1841, in the Lincolnshire village of Garthorpe and left the village school when he was fourteen. His first job took him to sea, on a coastal schooner belonging to his grandfather Thomas Holt. From the beginning he seems to have evinced a restless urge to do better for himself. At any rate, we find him being apprenticed before he was sixteen to William Laird, a Liverpool coal-dealer who was one of the famous shipbuilding family and brother to Macgregor Laird the West African explorer. By the sort of coincidence that would seem more appropriate to a novel, a clerk in the same firm's shipping department at that time was Alfred Jones, who was later, as head of the Elder Dempster shipping line, to become one of the outstanding personalities in West African affairs. In later years, though the business interests of the two men were often at variance, a real bond of sympathy and mutual admiration existed between them. After many a sharp encounter at the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce, they might be seen leaving arm in arm.

The apprenticeship was for five years. During that time Holt began to develop an interest in West Africa; there are references in his letters to the travels of Mungo Park and Macgregor Laird. Meanwhile, as the apprenticeship drew to a close, John Holt was clearly far from satisfied with the prospects it held out. A letter written to his father early in 1862 illustrates graphically not only the temper of the writer but something of the state of an England which had not altogether shaken itself free of the 'Hungry Forties'.

> 'Mankind is like a lot of hungry pigs fighting over a trough of milk—everybody seems to be trying to pull the piece of food out of his neighbour's mouth. . . . In England we have a great many people starving on account of being unable to get bread, and consequently work. What am I to do? If I stay where I am I have the prospect of a £60 salary which to my ambitious nature is beggary. No! it is money I want and money I must have if I go through fire and water for it. . . . It is not the gold, but the independence it brings and the cares it drives away. . . .'

He was at this time considering a job afloat as a purser, but in June he had the offer of a post as secretary to one James Lynslager,

British Consul in the Spanish island of Fernando Po off the Cameroons coast. The offer, which was for a term of three years at an annual salary of £100 with free board, lodging, passage and medical attendance, was accepted after due reflection. It was possibly the most momentous decision John Holt ever made.

His employer Laird added his blessing, though not without some reservations. He seems to have doubted whether working with Lynslager was the surest road to prosperity. Lynslager had a dominant and versatile but rootless character, less capable of keeping money than of making it. As well as being British Consul he ran a merchanting business, a plantation and farm, and a coaling agency for the British and American Governments. In his time he had been sailor, sailmaker, Government storekeeper, merchant and, lastly, Governor of the island (for which post he had never been paid). He was the possessor of a cork leg and his wife Juliana was a coloured woman.

On the 23rd June 1862, John Holt embarked from Liverpool in the steamship *Cleopatra*. At this time he was keeping a diary, to which we are indebted for the details of the voyage and much of his life on Fernando Po. The voyage lasted until 28th July and as the ship neared its destination, his thoughts were a mixture of resolve, loneliness and trepidation. He was still only twenty years old and an epidemic of yellow fever had just reached Fernando Po from the Coast. Fortunes are made where there is little competition, he tried to reassure himself, but he could not forget what it was that kept the competition down.

2

FOUNDATIONS OF A FAMILY BUSINESS

For some time, life on Fernando Po promised no better than any of John Holt's previous employments. At first sight the island was not unattractive. Its Portuguese discoverer in the fifteenth century had named it Formosa (the 'beautiful island') and beyond its coastal plain the mountains which culminate in a peak nearly 10,000 feet high are refreshingly untropical.

But life at the lowland capital of Port Clarence (or Santa Isabel, as the Spaniards called it) was by no means idyllic. For one thing, it was lonely for a raw young Englishman. In 1827 the administration of the island had been taken over, with Spanish consent, by the British, who used it as a naval station for ships employed in suppressing slave trade. But in 1844 the Spaniards reclaimed it and they had since pursued a policy of replacing the English language, customs and religious practices with their own. There were, for instance, no Anglican places of worship on Fernando Po.

In the second place, John Holt found his status ambiguous and his duties confusing. It was more than six months before Lynslager turned up at Port Clarence and in the meantime working for Mrs. Lynslager was not without difficulties and frustrations. John Holt had been engaged as a clerk, with the additional responsibilities of storekeeper and overseer. This, in fact, made him a sort of general factotum. Here is his own account of what his duties had come to be.

> '. . . I have to look after the store, sell goods and issue them to the traders, keep books and make out accounts, write the correspondence, gauge oil, look after the coals and the men who are employed down there discharging, in fact I have to do everything. . . .'

Mere multiplicity of duties might not have troubled John Holt, for he was never afraid of hard work. But his already well-developed business sense was affronted by the haphazard and piecemeal manner in which Lynslager's affairs were conducted. Right from the

start his zeal for orderly book-keeping was baffled by the variety and obscurity of his employer's interests—'money and goods all over the world', as his diary puts it. The cash account showed a loss of three hundred pounds or so every year, and the business remained unmanageable for all John Holt's endeavours.

This sort of disillusionment was not the worst of his trials. He was very soon saddled with the white man's burden of disease. Just a month after his arrival at Fernando Po, he had his first bout of fever and he continued to suffer regularly from a number of tropical disorders.

For a time, his ambitions were undaunted. But by the summer of 1863 the question of John Holt's return home was under serious consideration. This was mainly on account of his chronic ill-health, but partly also on account of his discontent with his work and prospects. In fact, a man to replace him arrived at Port Clarence from England shortly before the end of that year.

However John Holt did not go home after all. In March 1864 he went on his first trip from Fernando Po, to hire native labour—Kru-men—from the African coast north-west of the island. His relationship with Lynslager had been temporarily patched up and when he returned he found that his successor Tomlinson had fallen out of favour and was very soon to be discharged.

By now Lynslager himself had begun to ail, and on 14th September, at the age of fifty-four, he died. John Holt, who had held the reins of the business throughout his employer's illness, now made Mrs. Lynslager an offer. This was to the effect that he should become sole manager of the business for a salary of £200 a year plus board and servants. The offer was accepted and John Holt wasted no time in applying for vacant coaling and other agencies and in placing the corner post of a new store.

From this point the business soon began to prosper. For instance, the net profits for the half year ending 31st March 1866 were £837 16s. 1d. (on a capital of just over £3,000).

All this time he had been allowing his salary to accumulate as capital in the business and drawing a share of the profits proportionate to this capital. This helped him at last, in April 1867, to buy the business outright and—at the age of twenty-five—to start trading in Fernando Po on his own account. That burning desire for independence which had never left him since his days in William

Captain Jonathan C. Holt (1844-1896)

Thomas Holt (1848-1921)

Laird's offices in Liverpool had been realised. And, although he had many stiff years of struggle still ahead of him, the omens at that time were highly encouraging—a pronounced boom in West African trade was just beginning.

John Holt's first action was to return to England. He left his younger brother Jonathan who had hitherto pursued a career at sea, in charge at Fernando Po during his absence. Early that year, Jonathan had sailed the cutter *Edmund* (owned by another British merchant on the island) out to Fernando Po, and he remained there to act as his brother's agent and later to trade up and down the Coast for him. The enlistment of his brother was a particularly happy decision on John Holt's part. The brothers understood each other and got on well together both in business and outside it. Jonathan's death twenty-nine years later was a blow from which John Holt never quite recovered.

While he was in England, John Holt appointed the Liverpool firm of Irvine & Woodward, with whom he had had some dealings as manager of the Lynslager business, to act as his sole agents. Before this he had been negotiating his first shipments of goods for Fernando Po. On the 23rd July 1867, a consignment of 242 packages of merchandise was put on board the steamship *Calabar*. The merchandise gives a fair picture of West African import trade at that time. It consisted of provisions, flour, rice, pork, beef, sugar and soap; mineral-water, rum, brandy, beer and tobacco; cottons, silk handkerchiefs, umbrellas and hats; guns, matchets, hoop iron and shot.

Another consequence of the visit to England was the enrolment of a third brother in the new venture. Thomas Holt, who was younger than John by seven years and at that time working for a Hull draper, notified his brother of a desire to join him in West Africa. On 16th September John Holt wrote him a letter setting out terms of employment which lost nothing in business-like precision through being addressed to a member of the family. Thomas was to be engaged for a term of three years at a salary commencing at £80 yearly, rising to £120 for the third year, plus board, lodging, medical attendance and free passage. His duties were similar to those enforced on John Holt when he first went to Fernando Po—store salesman, clerk, book-keeper and overlooker, in fact 'any kind of work which a white man is capable of and presumably able to do in that climate'.

On 26th October Thomas Holt embarked from Liverpool on the brigantine *Peep O'Day*. The voyage was not without hazard. The ship ran into a gale and sprang a leak while the crew were too tipsy to get out the jib-boom. John Holt, who had preceded him, met the *Peep O'Day* at Cape Palmas. From here the brothers proceeded to Fernando Po where they joined Jonathan. The business of John Holt may now be said to have taken its first step as a family concern. It was not long before it also began to branch out from Fernando Po in the direction of the African mainland and the scene of its manifold trading activities at the present time.

John Holt's first house and shop, Fernando Po

1862.] THURSDAY, 26TH. [30 DAYS.

FRIDAY, 27TH.

SATURDAY, 28TH.

A page from John Holt's diary

3

ON THE COAST

A few months after John Holt had been joined by his brothers in Fernando Po, Jonathan returned to England on a new and momentous mission. This was to negotiate the purchase of their first ship. John Holt was now persuaded of the need for his own tonnage to develop trade with the African seaboard.

Some idea of exchange rates and local demand at that time may be gathered from the record of a trip made by John Holt to Cape Palmas and Liberia in the schooner *Peep O'Day* during the winter of 1867. For a large canoe he paid 5 guns, 5 3-gallon jars, 50 brass rods, 8 3-gallon iron pots, 1 case of gin, 8 gallons of rum, 30 heads of tobacco, 5 straw hats, 1 case of pipes and 1 beaver hat. For a small canoe he paid 1 gun, 2 3-gallon jars, 3 gallons of rum and 3 heads of tobacco.

Barter-rates for ivory are mentioned later elsewhere. For a large tusk of 44 lb. one might pay 4 yds. of red velvet and 6 yds. of scarlet cloth—total value 16s. For a tusk of 30 lb., 4 yds. of scarlet cloth and a looking glass—value 7s. A list of goods 'suitable for the African market' includes the following: cowries, coloured beads (especially mock coral), rum, musket-powder, soldiers' jackets, handkerchiefs, romalls and bandana, bracelets, coarse muslin, tobacco-pipes, gilt, silver and brass buttons, mirrors, knives, scissors, combs, needles, snuff-boxes, new shillings, natural-history books with plates, pocket compasses, watches and cameras.

Both the business and the local prestige of John Holt were now growing fast. On 1st April 1868 he was appointed acting Consul (with instructions not to involve the Government in any undue expense) during the absence from Fernando Po of the Consul. It was in this year that the commercial consulate at Lokoja was finally abandoned, so that the office at Fernando Po became the sole protector of all British trading interests in the Bights of Benin and Biafra.

JOHN HOLT,

Importer of Preserved Provisions, Wines, Spirits,

ALES AND GENERAL MERCHANDISE.

		Each.	Per Dozen.	Per Case.
PRESERVED MEATS.				
Ox Cheek and Vegetables	2 lb. tins	2/1	24/-	
Tripe and Onions	2 lb. ,,	1/4	14/-	
Roast Beef	1 lb. ,,	1/8	18/-	
Stewed Steaks	1 lb. ,,	1/8	18/-	
Minced Collops	1 lb. ,,	1/8	18/-	
Stewed Kidneys	1 lb. ,,	1/6	16/-	
Beef and Vegetables	1 lb. ,,	1/-	12/-	
Irish Stew	1 lb. ,,	1/4	14/-	
Haricot Mutton	1 lb. ,,	1/8	18/-	
Roast Mutton	1 lb. ,,	1/8	18/-	
Calf's Head	1 lb. ,,	1/8	18/-	
Roast Veal	1 lb. ,,	1/8	18/-	
Veal and Green Peas	1 lb. ,,	—	—	
Roast Lamb	1 lb. ,,	1/8	18/-	
Spiced Beef	1 lb. ,,	1/8	18/-	
Oxford Sausages	1 quarter	2/-		
Ox Tongue do	1 lb. ,,	3/1		
PRESERVED SOUPS.				
Oxtail	1 lb. tins	1/4	15/-	
Julienne	,,	1	12/-	
Hare	,,	1	16/-	
Green Pea	,,		1/-	
Mulligatawny	,,	1	15/-	
Extractum Carnis Liebig	¼ lb tins	3/1	1/-	
POTTED MEATS.				
Salmon	small tins		12/-	
Yarmouth Bloaters	,,		12/-	
Strasburg Meats	,,		20/-	

		Each.	Per Dozen.	Per Case.
PRESERVED FISH.				
Sardines	¼ tins		1/-	80/-
Do	½ tins		2/-	120/-
Salmon	1 lb. tins	1/8	18/-	1
Kippered Herrings	per tin	1/6	18/-	
Red Herrings	per tin of 12.	2/1	24/-	
Fresh Lobsters	1 lb. tins	1/6	18/-	
Fresh Oysters	,,	1/1	12/-	
Finnon Haddocks	24 ,,	1/8	20/-	
Anchovies	½ lb. tins	—	2/-	
Anchovy Paste	small pots	—	1/-	
Codfish	per lb.	9d	1	
,,	per 25 lbs.		15/-	
,,	per 100 lbs.		60/-	
Fresh Sardines	24 tins		2/-	
Salmon Cutlets	1 tin		3/1	
VEGETABLES.				
Green Peas	1 lb. tins	1/2	12/-	
Mushrooms	,,	1/6	16/-	
Carrots	,,	—	1/-	
Turnips	,,	—	—	
Sage and Onions	½ lb. tins	—	—	
Green Peas	24 tins	2/9	30/-	
SAUCES.				
Essence of Anchovies	½ pints	1/-	10/-	
Lea & Perrin's Worcester	,,	1/8	18/-	
Conserve of Tomatoes	pints	1/-	10/-	

Early price list

It was also in 1868 that Jonathan (who received his Master's certificate on 29th October) purchased the *Maria* for John Holt. She was a two-masted, fore-and-aft 65-ton schooner, Plymouth-built with a length of 71 ft. and beam of 16 ft. She was sixteen years old and cost £620. *Maria* was closely identified with John Holt's fortunes until 1876 when she was sold for £600 and heard of no more. But her figurehead remains a treasured relic of the Company and may be seen today in the Board Room at the Royal Liver Building.

Early the following year, Captain Jonathan brought the *Maria* out to Fernando Po. He arrived on 6th April after a forty-six days' passage. John Holt approved his brother's choice, and some five months later he committed himself to the opinion that 'she has no equal on the Coast'.

With the arrival of *Maria*, John Holt was now able to realise his ambition of setting up his own 'factories'—the old Scots merchanting term for trading posts—on the Coast itself. Within a matter of weeks, factories had been started at Bimbia in the Cameroons north-east of the island, to the south at Bata in Spanish Guinea and in Gaboon where Thomas Holt took over the management. Later, another factory was started on the small coastal island of Elobey. Building the factories, supplying them and carrying their African produce to Fernando Po for trans-shipment by mail- and cargo-boat was entrusted to Jonathan, at a commission of five per cent on the net proceeds of all produce (mainly palm oil, rubber and yams) shipped from the factories.

On Fernando Po itself, business was flourishing and the property extending itself. A contemporary price-list of goods in stock on the island reveals a wide range and diversity of items—medicines, fancy goods and paints as well as spirits, beer and tobacco and all kinds of provisions. In this variety may be seen the beginnings of a liberal buying policy catering for the widest possible demand, a policy which has remained a feature of the Company's African trading up to the present day. The same policy was pursued in the Coast factories. 'The traders in Gaboon were a very conservative lot', Thomas Holt recalled, years later. 'They had no assortment of goods and John Holt revolutionised the trade.'

Business on the island was brisk enough to carry the Coast factories safely through their teething troubles. 'I have done a very

The schooner Maria

Maria's *figurehead*

profitable business in Fernando Po,' John Holt recorded in his diary on 8th January 1870. 'Last year, in 1868, I cleared close upon £800. This year—£2,000, although I have had a loss of about £300 on a cargo of wood . . . and some bad debts. I have made nothing on the South Coast trade, but I am not surprised, as I did not expect to.'

But there was nothing automatic or easy about John Holt's advances, even on Fernando Po. Throughout the diary (even sharing the page of the above entry) the shadow of disease and death is always present. Jonathan himself went down with a particularly bad attack of typhoid fever in August that year and for nearly three months his life hung in the balance. John Holt, though never given to the demonstration of affection, was deeply attached to his brother and his diary at this time reveals unusual feeling and something like despair.

> 'Today I felt as I have never felt in my life. I had often thought during this awful sickness that Jonathan was going to die. I was determined to leave Africa and go home for good, if he did, but today I felt as if there was no hope left. . . . I blamed myself for the result I anticipated, as I said he would never have come here but for me. My mind was full of horrors . . .'

But Jonathan had his share of the family toughness and he recovered. On the 22nd November he was back on his Coast itinerary again, merely noting laconically in his diary: 'Not having sufficient sickness during the past three months, had a little fever and took quinine.'

Meanwhile, trading conditions to the south were far from settled. In May of the following year there was a joint complaint from the traders against the chiefs and people of the Spanish islands of Corisco and Elobey. It will be remembered that there was now a Holt factory on the latter. The traders complained that their trade was being held up and seriously jeopardised by native activities, which included plundering, extortion of credit by threats and actual force, sabotage, the exaction of compulsory 'tariffs' before goods could be beached, knife-play and arson. Life on these islands had reached an acute pitch of tension and the aggrieved merchants were driven in self-defence to invoke the 'hostage' principle.

Similar disturbances in the oil-river territory of Bonny, Okrika, New Calabar and Brass to the north-east of Fernando Po had been settled without violence by the appearance of the British Consul in

dress uniform, which included a cocked hat and a rapier. But on Elobey and Corisco it was necessary, with the endorsement of the Spanish authorities, to apply much more drastic punitive measures.

This sort of disturbance was an extreme case, but trading was still liable to suffer from periodic disturbances even when the traders were not personally involved. In the winter of 1873, for instance, trade at the Bata factory came to an entire standstill for nearly three months because of an outbreak of fighting amongst the bush people.

It was early in the following year (1874) that John Holt decided to return to England. This decision brings to a close what might be called the first phase of the Company's history—the establishment and consolidation of an independent business. On his return home at the age of thirty-three, John Holt could reflect on many positive achievements as a credit to his twelve years in Africa. He was the owner of a large newly-built store (insured with its contents in 1875 for £2,000) doing a lucrative business on Fernando Po, together with his coaling agencies and other interests there. His factories on the Coast were firmly entrenched, notwithstanding the sort of setbacks previously described, and he now had a miniature fleet of his own, including his first steamer *Pioneer*, plying the Coast. He had acted as British Consul and was already a man of considerable weight in local affairs.

When he left Fernando Po, his brother Thomas came from Gaboon to take charge on the island. The Gaboon factory was thereafter managed by Harry Cotterell who was later to become a partner with John Holt. The general supervision of the factories and the control of their traffic remained in Jonathan's hands.

John Holt had not been satisfied with his agents' handling of affairs in Liverpool and one of the first things he did on returning was to liquidate the agreement and to set up his own office in Commercial Buildings, Water Street. This was another landmark in the firm's progress and the beginning of a steady expansion of headquarters which culminated in April 1912 with the establishment of offices in the Royal Liver Building.

26, *Preeson's Row,*

Liverpool,

29th February, 1884.

Dear Sir,

I have the pleasure to inform you that my brother, JONATHAN COCKIN HOLT, *has entered into Partnership with me here, as from the first day of January last; and that the business heretofore carried on by me in this city in my own name will henceforth be continued under the style of* JOHN HOLT & CO.

I avail myself of this opportunity to gratefully acknowledge the many obligations I am under to my numerous business friends, and I trust the new Firm will merit the confidence and support so kindly and freely extended to me.

HARRY COTTERELL, *my partner in Bonny and New Calabar, trading under the style of "Holt and Cotterell," will continue the supervision of his department in my office, and sign per procuration.*

THOMAS HOLT, *my brother, in charge of the Cash Department, will also sign per procuration; and referring you to the respective signatures at foot,*

I remain, dear Sir,

Yours faithfully,

John Holt will sign John Holt & Co John Holt

Jonathan Cockin Holt will sign John Holt & Co

Harry Cotterell will sign P. pro John Holt & Co. H Cotterell

Thomas Holt will sign P. pro: John Holt & Co. Thomas Holt

John Holt and Company founded: a family partnership

ERA OF COMPETITION

During the next ten years progress followed the same pattern of territorial expansion, though it was subject to one or two significant new factors. West African trade continued to boom and there were others besides John Holt who were attracted by the growing market for native products. Competition in fact was becoming intense along the Coast and Jonathan's early letters to his brother at home stress continually 'the difficulty of making this trade pay', particularly the factory trade in ivory, rubber and ebony. The need was always for buying more and more cheaply (which in itself dictated a greater mobility and wider territorial range) and for cheaper and more varied supplies from Liverpool.

Once John Holt had taken over personally this end of the business, the supply position improved. At any rate, trade continued to pay, though in 1876 he was writing to his brother Thomas, 'Fernando Po is still the best-paying place if well attended to. . . . There's only a profit on Gaboon last year,' he says in the same letter, '. . . of about £350 after all Jonathan's hard work and expense.'

At first, expansion on the Coast followed its original southward bent. Factories were established still further south of Gaboon, at Cape Lopez (now Port Gentil) on the Ogowe, at Sette Cama and Fernand Vaz. But it was at this time that the West African palm-oil and kernel trade was being boosted by developments in Britain—an increasing demand both for lubricants for the new machinery and for such domestic items as soap, candles and margarine.

Hitherto, John Holt had not had any very large share in this trade. He had not been represented at all on the oil-rivers' seaboard—that lucrative belt of the Niger coast, running south from Benin and then east to Old Calabar. Now he decided that the time was ripe to make an appearance on this coast, notwithstanding the fact that it was the most keenly competitive of all.

The oil-river traders at this time were still operating mainly from hulks in the river-mouths. On the Bonny River, for example, there were some seven or eight trading hulks as well as hulks acting as receiving depots for the steamships of two West African lines. Life on the hulks was at once hard-working and lonely—the only intercommunication was by gig. Competition was strenuous, especially between the agents of the steamship companies, who received a commission of 1s. on every cask of oil they could get for the ships operating direct from the United Kingdom. Each of the many river-mouths indenting this coast was governed by one or more African potentates who, under treaty with the British Consul, protected the lives and properties of the white traders in return for duties ('comey') amounting to about 2s. 6d. on every ton of oil exported.

The oil-river kings were well aware of the value of their trade to the Europeans and they looked for more kinds of tribute than their legal 'comey'. Moreover, the trader had to be on his guard against short weight. Some of his suppliers had a trick of half-filling their casks with wood, secured in such a way to the inside of the heads that instead of a cask holding fifty gallons as registered by the gauging rod it might hold no more than twenty-five. Sometimes half-filled casks were made to look full by the addition of a certain herb, which caused the oil to ferment.

John Holt's interest in this trade began in February 1881, when Harry Cotterell was appointed to act as his agent on the Bonny and New Calabar Rivers. Cotterell, who had succeeded Thomas Holt as agent in Gaboon in 1874, had later been trading on the Bonny River for the Liverpool merchants who were formerly John Holt's home agents. This latter company was now taken over, with Cotterell remaining as senior agent. A year later he became more closely associated with John Holt, in a partnership styled Holt & Cotterell.

Chief agent for the new partnership was Thomas Welsh, another well-known personality in the Liverpool-West African trade. He had been working for Cotterell on hulks in the Bonny district since 1876 and remained there until 1887 when he set up in Lagos in a new partnership with John Holt.

The competition already referred to as a keynote of this period was now beginning to assume international proportions. In 1876, two years after John Holt had left Fernando Po for the last time,

King Leopold II of Belgium had called an international conference at Brussels to consider the development of Central Africa. But the International Association set up by this conference did nothing to restrain what has sometimes been called the 'scramble for Africa' now in progress and intensified by Stanley's discovery of the course of the Congo in 1878. The British Government had not taken any part in the 'scramble', though French, German and Belgian influence was now closing steadily in round the Niger territory in which a large part of her West African trading interests were situated. Already the older British settlements of the Gambia, Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast had been effectively isolated and restricted from further expansion by the energetic French policy of linking up their own coastal interests by internal occupations and this pattern was being repeated to the south-east.

In 1877, a young captain in the Royal Engineers named George Goldie-Taubman visited the Niger territory to have a look at the trading concerns in which his family's money was invested. He assessed at once both the value of this territory to Britain and the trend of international politics in West Africa. Accordingly he set about a policy of amalgamating and consolidating the firms already trading there, including non-British firms, so that at the Berlin Conference of 1885, invoked to define national spheres of influence in West Africa, the British delegation was able to justify a claim to the Niger Basin. Next year the National African Company (as the amalgamated firms were now titled) was granted a Royal Charter; it became the Royal Niger Company and its founder became Sir George Goldie in 1887.

As far as John Holt was concerned, the first impact of international competition fell on his southward interests, which were mainly in French territory. The imposition of a high scale of tariffs now began to make things difficult. A letter John Holt wrote to his agent at Cape Lopez on 31st March 1885, is worth substantial quotation, equally for its sound business philosophy and summary of the writer's West African experience.

> 'I notice by your letter to the firm that you are anxious about our interests in the Ogowe. I do not wonder at this seeing the ruinous prices you must invoice your goods at under the new tariff and the impossibility of making money, tariff or no tariff, with so much competition. Ever since I have had to do with Africa I have had to stand heavy competition, therefore it is no new experience. In

Trading station, Old Calabar

George Watts' factory, Old Calabar

Fernando Po I had to make money while my competitors ruined themselves. The same in Gaboon and I am happy to say that I never had a year of actual loss. I always made something to the good. This induces me to encourage you to persevere. . . . We do not ask for impossibilities. Do the best you can. You know the price of produce. Give a limit to your traders so as to buy without actual loss and if others pay more let them have it until they are tired. They will learn wisdom in time. Use slowly your cargo and to as good purpose as possible. In due course either the present duties will be modified or the natives will have to give more produce or all trade will be stopped and the colony ruined. . . . But I can hardly believe the present tariff will continue. . . .'

Meanwhile, on 29th February of the preceding year (1884), another landmark had been reached in the history of John Holt. On this date was formed the partnership called John Holt & Company, with John and Jonathan Holt as sole partners and Thomas Holt as head of the cash department. The new Company absorbed the partnership of Holt & Cotterell and its interests in Bonny and New Calabar.

Further interests on the oil-rivers were acquired in 1885, when the brothers entered into partnership with George Watts, to form the Liverpool African Company. George Watts, with whom John Holt had been acquainted during his days on Fernando Po, had been trading on his own from hulks in Old Calabar and the Cameroons. He had also, in 1880-81, succeeded in starting a small factory on the Qua Ibo river which enters the sea between Opobo and Old Calabar. Trade with the Qua Ibos was complicated by the activities of a certain King Ja Ja of Opobo, who tried to monopolise the palm-oil trade outside as well as inside his own kingdom. His methods included a series of savage attacks on neighbouring peoples, to prevent them from doing business on their own account with the traders. The Qua Ibos in particular suffered from wholesale massacres, destruction of property and abductions, until 1887 when Ja Ja was tried by a new and vigorous British Consul and deported to the West Indies.

These latest acquisitions gave John Holt a footing in the Old Calabar country at the eastern edge of the oil-rivers' territory. At that time traders in the territory had to come to terms with a form of secret society called Egbo which had far-reaching social powers. An alliance with Egbo could be of great benefit to the trader. There

is in existence in the John Holt archives an agreement which reads:

> 'I, Prince James Egamba V., hereby agree and promise that at any time at the request of George Watts or his agent, that I will blow Egbo upon any Calabar man who may be due the said George Watts or his agent—to compel the said Calabar man pay his just debt.'

(To 'blow Egbo' was to sound the Egbo horn outside the debtor's house, an act which confined him to his house until he had paid up.) It was also possible for European traders to acquire for themselves the powers of some lower grades of Egbo—for something more than a nominal charge.

Elobey factory

West African Trading Hulks, 1862

Clarence Cove, Fernando Po, 1832

5

DEATH OF A PARTNER—BIRTH OF A COMPANY

The emergence of John Holt from local to something like national importance in West African affairs during the decade following his return to England in 1874 is signalled by the fact that he attended the international conference at Berlin in 1885 as a British delegate. With him were such notable figures as Alfred Jones, Edward Cookson and the explorer H. M. Stanley.

There was nothing spectacular about his success during these ten years. It was the sure and steady outcome of a tireless application to his business. At the same time, there was nothing automatic about it. Throughout the last quarter of the century (and, indeed, during the first quarter of the present century), many European traders disappeared from the scene, some of them with longer histories than John Holt's. But he succeeded where others failed because of his remarkable adaptability. His buying and selling were always flexible. He had a genuine flair for anticipating trading trends and recessions. He knew when to shorten his sails, but above all he knew when to hold on to a course that others would have abandoned. This inspired endurance, as it might be called, is discernible not only in his early days, when he kept his first Coastal factories going, and even increased them, at a time when profits were marginal and precarious, but also in later years when nationalistic excesses threatened the whole of his business in certain territories.

As a result of the Berlin Conference, British traders were given a greater degree of political support by the establishment of the British Oil Rivers Protectorate. Another result, as mentioned earlier, was the grant of a Royal Charter to the Goldie group of firms in 1886. From the port of Forcados round to the Brass River, the territory of the Lower Niger began to be rapidly developed by the newly-styled Royal Niger Company and trade and administrative order were carried far inland.

The virtual monopoly exercised in this huge territory by the Charter Company forced the oil-traders east of the Brass River to consider organising on their own account and as a result the African Association was formed on 25th May 1889, with headquarters in Liverpool. The Association consisted of some eight West African oil-trading concerns and it had a nominal capital of £2 million. John Holt was director and later chairman. His oil-river interests, those in Bonny and New Calabar and those formerly vested in the Liverpool African Company partnership with George Watts, were transferred to the African Association later the same year. In due course, the Association reached a working agreement with the Niger Company respecting each other's legitimate spheres of interest, but it was not without a certain strain on diplomatic relations first!

John Holt continued as chairman of the Association until 1896, when he resigned from the Board. It may be said that John Holt was never a man for associations and confederations. He was an individualist with an unswerving confidence in his own judgment. At the time of his resignation, the Board was carrying seventeen members and this in fact was one of his quarrels with the organisation. In addition, he was at odds with the financial policy of the Board, which he believed was straining its reserves too far in the cause of large dividends and bonuses. John Holt was always a firm believer in the building up of reserves, right from his early days on Fernando Po. Events always vindicated his belief, and never more so than in the economic blizzard which broke on West African trade after the First World War. It was the strength of the Company's reserves, together with a family attitude inherited from its founder, which sustained the Company when many others fell by the wayside.

John Holt's interests continued to spread themselves during this period. Geographically, he moved still further north-west and south. In 1887, together with Thomas Welsh, he branched out in Lagos and Porto Novo (in Dahomey) in a new partnership called Holt & Welsh. To the south he struck new territory far beyond his previous confines in the French Congo when in 1890 he took over the Lower Guinea Company and acquired thereby interests along the Angola coast at Ambriz, Ambrizette and elsewhere.

The early 1890s were by no means auspicious years for new ventures, especially in those territories within the French sphere of influence. A French campaign of pacification by force was being

A 'loaded' palm-oil cask (*see page 28*)

Lagos factory, 1899

carried on in Dahomey and elsewhere, with disastrous consequences for local trade. A letter from John Holt to his partner Thomas Welsh in Lagos and Porto Novo, written on 4th October 1892, sums up the situation:

> 'The gloom still continues to hang over the trade in which we are so much interested. We do not seem any nearer the end yet. I suppose we cannot look for any improvement of consequence until next year now. The Jebu trade has to be organised on new lines and that will take time. Abeokuta is still unsubdued and unconverted. Dahomey has still to be conquered and when that is done the same long period of reorganisation of trade has to be waited for.'

To the south, in the French Congo, matters looked still worse for John Holt, as the system of monopoly concessions first set up by Leopold II of Belgium in the Congo Free State began to be copied by the French in their own part of the Congo.

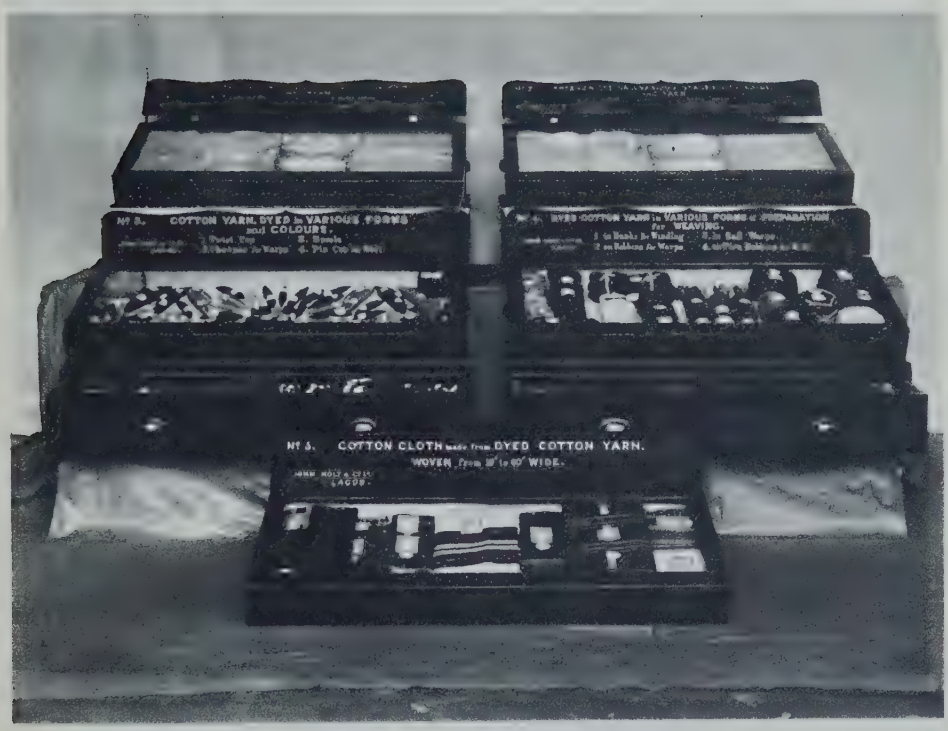
In 1896 John Holt suffered the hardest blow of all. On 14th September his brother and partner Jonathan died, at the age of fifty-two. Quite apart from the sense of personal loss which he felt very acutely, John Holt was now inflicted with additional heavy responsibilities, for his brother had been anything but a sleeping partner.

One result of Jonathan's death, however, proved to be of lasting importance. On 29th March of the following year (1897), the partnership of John Holt & Company was converted into a limited company, to be known, as it has remained to the present day, as John Holt & Company (Liverpool) Limited. The first directors were John Holt, as chairman and managing director, Thomas Holt and Thomas Welsh.

The new Company took over all the existing Holt establishments on the West African coast. In 1898, the Thomas Welsh partnership in Lagos and Porto Novo was absorbed into the Company. Since 1894, Welsh had been buying for the partnership from an office in Manchester. On the dissolution of the partnership he set up his own trading store at Old Calabar, in which he was soon to be associated with the second generation of the Holt family.

The incorporation of the new Company had heralded a further change of office quarters, this time to Princes Buildings, 81 Dale Street, on 9th September 1898. A junior member of the staff here

was Robert Longstaff Holt, John Holt's second son, who had entered his father's offices on 13th October 1896. His elder brother, Jonathan Cockin Holt, was employed at the Manchester buying office of Thomas Welsh. The second generation had entered the family business. In a year or two's time, though still in their early twenties, they were to begin trading on the Coast on their own account.



Show case at Lagos, 1903

yes please let me
know if there should
be chance
of seeing you. Should
however wish to you
from South again —
I remain
always yours
Sincerely
M H Kingsley

4-3-00

Mary Kingsley

4

PATTERN FOR A NEW CENTURY

As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, the change was marked appropriately enough by three new developments in the history of John Holt. Firstly, John Holt himself now began to take an active part in the political and social affairs of West Africa. Though he was first and last a trader of the old school, the turn of events bound commercial, social and political matters inextricably together and obliged him to involve himself publicly to a degree which was quite alien to his unostentatious nature. Secondly, Jonathan and Robert, the two sons of the Company's founder, started their own Coastal businesses and began to acquire the practical trading experience which would later enable them to carry on the family company without any break in tradition.

Thirdly, the assumption of full administrative responsibility in the Niger Territory by H.M. Government was accompanied by a full-scale drive to open up the hinterland with modern communications and transport so that the expansion of the Company, hitherto confined to the seaboard, now progressed inland.

Developments in all three directions marched together for the first ten years of the century. But for convenience sake, they are better dealt with under their separate heads.

To begin with, John Holt himself was assuming an unfamiliar role in new and non-commercial controversies. His position as an influential West African merchant was already assured. It was in this capacity that he made the acquaintance of Mary Kingsley. This most remarkable of Victorian ladies made her first visit to the Coast in 1893 ostensibly to study 'fish and fetish', but she became immediately a friend and champion of the West Africans themselves. She also succeeded in making firm friends with many of the Coastal traders. John Holt proved to be one of her staunchest allies. Throughout the few but lively years of her West African adventures, until her

untimely death in 1900 in a South African military hospital, she corresponded with him constantly and sought his advice on many points concerning African welfare.

'John Holt', she said once, 'was my sort of merchant.' Some other opinions she expressed are worth quoting. 'John Holt is a very fine man,' she wrote in a letter to E. D. Morel, 'the one man in ten that would in my mind save Sodom and Gomorrha.' In another letter: '. . . I regard Mr. Holt as my political leader, and am a nice nuisance to him; but I absolutely trust him, and I know the educated Africans look on him as the only man they can rely on.' There was nothing in the least sentimental about John Holt's attitude towards the natives of West Africa, and this commended him to Mary Kingsley. It was compounded of the most practical elements. He recognised, first of all, how much his own prosperity depended on the Africans. 'They made me what I am,' he said once. 'Their labour, their muscles, their enterprise, have given me everything I possess. I am bound to try and protect them against outrage and injustice.'

Moreover, he was convinced that no lasting economic benefit (and this, to his mind, was the only justification for the presence of Europeans in West Africa at all) could be reaped unless the Africans were allowed to retain their freedom and independence in matters of land, produce and labour. 'When will people realise', he wrote in a letter, 'that the produce of the land is the Black man's money? He has no other with which to buy the White man's goods.'

The Berlin Conference of 1885 had brought into existence the Congo Free State and placed it under the direct control of the Belgian Government. A few years later, decrees were passed which virtually appropriated the Congo soil and its products in favour of certain privileged monopoly *concessionaires*. This sweeping dispossession of the Congo Africans, as well as the stranglehold it put on all trade in that enormous territory, offended against John Holt's deepest convictions. But when the *concessionaire* system extended itself to the French Congo, it placed him in a very special dilemma. In 1899, his agents in Ogowe were seized and his goods confiscated by a monopoly society established there by the French Government. The high-handed methods of this society were described as 'intolerable' even by its own countrymen. For John Holt, who had been established on the Middle Ogowe for ten years, and indeed in Gaboon for twenty-five, where he had always faithfully complied with all the

legal and fiscal requirements of the administration (which at times were excessive), this was a damaging blow.

As a result of this new turn of events John Holt realised that if he were to make common cause with the humanitarians fighting for Congo Reform, it might well be said that he was exploiting a social movement for his own commercial advantage. Moreover, any public campaigning on his part would be very embarrassing to the Foreign Office who were at that time engaged in negotiating the *entente cordiale*. 'So far as I am able to discover', he once wrote to E. D. Morel, 'my destiny arranged by Providence is to be a distributor of merchandise. Have I the capacity or mental qualifications for any other role?' It was only after a long struggle with himself that he finally took the course his conscience was bound to dictate, and made a public case of the injuries he was receiving at the *concessionaires*' hands. Only by such public action could sufficient evidence be provided to strengthen the arguments for the enforcement of the Berlin Conference clauses which in the Congo were now being abused.

A bitter and lonely period followed for John Holt. The calumny and abuse he had anticipated descended on him from many sides, not least from some colleagues in the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce, who had an interest in maintaining the Congo *status quo*. But, characteristically, he allowed nothing to deflect him from a course once adopted. And he had the satisfaction of seeing the lot of the Congo natives improved before he died. On 16th June 1913, the Congo Reform Association (founded in 1904) was finally dissolved, its task successfully completed.

It was mainly through his interest in the cause of Congo Reform that he became associated with such leading reformers as E. D. Morel and Roger Casement. His alliance with Morel might be compared, both for its integrity and its effects, with the friendship with Mary Kingsley. When John Holt died, Morel was inspired to write in his memory a most sincere and splendid tribute to a merchant 'whose vision was not bounded by the palm-oil cask', whose outstanding knowledge of African business and politics was equalled by his sense of justice.

It might be added that John Holt's dogged insistence on justice during this period also met with some material reward. After long years of litigation, the redress to which he was fairly entitled from the French authorities was at last obtained in the form of a freehold

Chief Egbe Town
Warri S. Nigeria

Dear Sir

I am very sorry to hear the death of old john Holt. I too suffered a great loss at the passing away of so great a friend. And I know you were john Holt at your father's presence, and after his death I hope you will carry on the business on a broader and firmer basis. His kind action towards me when I went to Lokoja will never be forgotten. His letter is still in my possession, which I showed to every man that comes to my place and they know that he was and now is a great and honourable man on earth and in Heaven. When old john Holt died, had he been a gre black man, I would do for him what a faithful friend would do to one at his death. And as he is a whiteman I am at a loss what to do, or else I would do something still to show that I am his friend. Old john Holt died in a very bad time due to this great war or I would try and come to see you in England.

Please accept my sympathy and give same to Mrs. john Holt.

I am sir
yours faithfully
Chief Egbe his X mark

ARS.

An African chief's tribute to John Holt

forest concession near Libreville in Gaboon, which produces valuable hardwoods for export.

The first ten years of the century were thus for John Holt years of personal crisis. Meanwhile, in 1898, his sons Jonathan and Robert had become associated in partnership with Thomas Welsh, who had started a business at Old Calabar. A year later a new venture on the Brass River, called the Brass Trading Company, was set up, with Welsh acting as agent, manager and supplier under the direction of the brothers. In 1910, two more members of the family joined the Brass venture. They were Thomas Godfrey and John Holt junior, sons of the late Captain Jonathan. The four partners also took over the Calabar business, which became known as Holt Brothers & Company. During the First World War, both these Nigerian ventures were assimilated by John Holt & Company (Liverpool) Ltd.

For the Company itself, apart from its establishments in the French Congo, the first decade of the century brought a notable expansion. The Crown's assumption of political responsibility in Nigeria after 1899 was followed by rapid economic development. The harbour at Lagos was improved and railways from this port and from Port Harcourt were pushed inland. John Holt had long been a partisan of inland transport development and each advance of the railways and roads found his factories already in operation along its route. The Company first established itself at the up-river port of Warri and by 1901, factories were as far inland as Lokoja. From here they penetrated far up the Benue River. By 1911, the name of Holt had been carried to the greater part of Northern Nigeria. To serve the factories on the Niger and Benue Rivers during the navigable seasons, a fleet of rivercraft began to be assembled.

The Company's advances were marked at home by another change of premises on 6th June 1905, when headquarters were set up in Colonial House, Water Street. In the same building were the offices of Elder Dempster & Co. Ltd., of which firm Alfred Jones was co-director. Thus, the two men who had started their careers as youthful clerks in the same firm nearly fifty years before shared a common roof again—two outstanding figures in Liverpool's time-honoured trade who never allowed commercial rivalry to degenerate into personal enmity. On 2nd April 1912, the Company made its final move to the Royal Liver Building. But while the Company was confidently striking out still further afield, the strength of its founder,

over-taxed by the crises of recent years, was beginning to fail. On 28th February 1910, John Holt was attacked by a stroke—the second of its kind but the more severe—which left him virtually paralysed. He was obliged to give up his activities with the Company and spent the remaining years of his life on his farm at Broughton Grange in Lincolnshire. On 22nd June 1915, he died, two days before the fifty-third anniversary of his first departure from Liverpool for Fernando Po. He was 73 years old.

Some account has already been given of the physical toughness and tenacity of his earlier years, of the untiring labour and far-sighted thrift he applied to the creation of his business empire, of the exceptional grasp of West African economics and politics he acquired in later years, and of the sense of social mission he showed in that last phase of his active life. Something more, perhaps, deserves to be said about his personal character. He was a reticent and undemonstrative man, and his dislike of show and publicity was carried, in fact, to extremes. This was one of the reasons why the public stand he had to take during the troublous times of Congo Reform was so painful to him. Moreover, it was not generally known until some time after his death that he had had a leading share in the foundation of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine.

Many of his acquaintances may have believed him to be a hard man. It is true that he was trained in a hard school—'the West African trade is not conspicuous for kid gloves and rose-water', wrote Morel in his memoir. He drove a hard bargain and he expected others, not least his own sons, to work as hard as he did himself. Outwardly he was brusque and harsh when he might have been kindly and genial. But this forbidding exterior hid a genuine generosity, as many people who needed his help could testify.

Nor was his hardness ever at the expense of honour or fair play. 'The merchant might be hard in his dealings, but he must be faithful to his word and stern in his honesty.' This is how Mrs. J. R. Green of the African Society (which John Holt had helped to found in Mary Kingsley's memory) summed up John Holt's own ideal of commercial behaviour. It is an ideal which the Victorian age in particular believed to be practicable and in that respect John Holt was a true Victorian merchant. In so far as he believed that the ideal should be extended to political and social dealings with the West Africans, he was something more. He was a merchant-statesman.

PART TWO

The Company Today

THE MODERN FRAMEWORK

In the preceding chapters some account has been given of the Company's origins. The time has now come to take a closer look at its present-day activities.

Although since the Second World War John Holt & Co. (Liverpool) Ltd. has ventured widely into the sphere of international merchanting by extending its scope and interests to other continents, the greater part of the Company's business still remains concentrated in West Africa in the form of a house of general merchants engaged in import and export trade. This and the succeeding chapters, therefore, will be devoted to a description of its trading activities there, while the new developments are dealt with separately in the closing chapter.

The marketing of imported merchandise and the collection of exportable produce is organised by Districts, Ventures and Factories. In the last two cases the traditional merchant terminology has been preserved. Factories are not manufactories but trading stations, so named because they were originally in the charge of factors. Ventures are not financial flutters, but main branches, the original definition of the word 'venture' being 'a scheme for making a gain by way of trade'.

Another old merchanting term still survives in the word 'beach' which, of course, derives from the time when trading was largely confined to coastal beaches. It now usually denotes the main street of the town or village where the main factory sites are, or sometimes the main factory site of the Company itself. As it is no longer solely applied to coastal areas, main streets several hundred miles inland are often referred to as 'the Beach'.

The Company's West African trading area is divided into seven districts. There are four in Nigeria, with headquarters at Lagos, Kano, Port Harcourt, and Warri, and one each for the Gold Coast

(which incorporates Togoland under British Mandate) and Dahomey (which includes Togoland under French Mandate) with headquarters at Accra and Cotonou respectively. The seventh district covers the Cameroons (under French Mandate) and Gaboon, and has its headquarters at Duala in the French Cameroons.

Each district is managed by a district agent who is responsible for all the merchandise and produce trade handled by his territory, and also, of course, for the Company's organisation and administration in the district. The term 'agent' is a very old one in West Africa and has not the same meaning as is normally given to it in other countries. The district agent therefore is roughly equivalent to the general manager of an area.

These districts are in turn sub-divided into ventures managed by venture agents who can be likened to branch managers, and these venture agents are in turn supported by assistants of whom an increasing number are Company-trained and promoted Africans.

Many ventures have subordinate trading stations spread throughout the more important villages and small towns. It may fairly be claimed that in all the areas mentioned—whether British, French, or Mandated territory—the range and network of the Company's organisation ensure a live and comprehensive connection with all local markets.

The Gold Coast Colony, together with Ashanti and the Northern Territories, which are protectorates, and Togoland under British Mandate, cover an area of some 90,000 square miles, and have a population of over four million. As far as the Company is concerned it is its newest district, as it was not until 1935 that a venture was established in the Gold Coast proper at Accra, though there had been a factory at Keta near the Togo border since the early 1920s. The organisational pattern in this district contains many features common to the whole coastal picture, including the most up-to-date developments, and merits a fairly detailed account on that score.

There are eight ventures in this district, at Accra, Keta, Tarkwa, Koforidua, Sekondi, Nsawam, Kumasi, and Hohoe which is actually in Togoland (a territory administratively attached to the Gold Coast but owing certain obligations to the United Nations in the matter of economic development). Takoradi, with its comparatively modern harbour installation, is the main port. The other ports are surf-ports, which means that incoming cargoes are unloaded by surf-boats from

Robert Longstaff Holt

Son of the Founder — Chairman 1917-1947

ships standing offshore. The fact that the Company is not represented in the Northern Territories, except indirectly through Kumasi, the old capital of Ashanti and the Gold Coast's biggest single trading centre, is the result of a policy of developing a system of African intermediary trade, which makes inland 'branching' by the Company unnecessary. All further distribution of merchandise is done through African hands.

Building up the African middleman has always been a cardinal principle of John Holt's. Something like three-quarters of the Company's total West African trade is wholesale—that is, merchandise is sold to established middlemen. Much of the remainder is still wholesale business, though done at Company shops and operated at a lower level by African clerks who trade with their own clientele.

In pursuit of this policy, credit and financial accommodation of various kinds are made available to actual and potential customers. True to the spirit of John Holt himself, the Company believes that it is a main function of a large import and export house to enable customers to take full advantage of any commercial operations which may be open to them. More and more the Company has become a merchant-banker, financing and advising on African business in general (including the promotion of local industries) and stimulating the growth of African retailing in particular. Often the latter is done by encouraging African employees to start out on their own, by giving them practical help and guidance. In the Gold Coast especially, such businesses have turned out well because of the Company's training in accountancy and book-keeping, in credit control and in the efficient handling and quick turnover of stocks.

Within recent years, moreover, the Company has developed interests in various branches of insurance. In most Colonies it now operates agencies for large British companies in the fields of fire, accident, and compulsory third-party insurance.

Another feature of the Gold Coast organisation which is also found elsewhere is the employment of specialists, who might be described as the district agent's staff officers advising him and his venture agents on particular aspects of merchandise for which a highly specialised knowledge is required. The rising standard of living, accelerated by the boom conditions of the war, has brought an increasing discrimination as well as a widening demand amongst African consumers. No one agent can reasonably be expected today

to possess an expert knowledge of *all* commodities and their locally-specialised markets, particularly in the Gold Coast where consumer discrimination is highly developed. The marketing of printed cotton piece-goods, for instance, which are the principal single commodity sold in this Colony, calls for a genuine flair in interpreting the discerning tastes of the Gold Coast consumer.

Accordingly, the headquarters at Accra has specialists in machinery, provisions and building materials, as well as textiles, on its staff. There are also, at Takoradi (with Sekondi) and Accra, depot agents who deal with specialised port and shipping matters such as transport, service and customs routines.

In the adjacent district of Dahomey, embracing French Togo, there are five ventures situated at Cotonou, Porto Novo, Ouidah, Bohicon, and Lome (the Togo capital). Cotonou itself and Lome are the ports (both surf-ports) and at each of these there are depot agents as at the Gold Coast ports. The Company are virtually the only British nationals operating in these Colonies, of which Dahomey comes under the French administration at Dakar. Business in this district is done mostly through small traders, for there are as yet not enough middlemen for a fully-fledged wholesale trade, and as elsewhere there are widespread credit facilities for the Company's customers.

The main strength of the Company is deployed in the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria. The Colony itself is only a small strip of land running along the coast on either side of and including Lagos, the remainder of Nigeria forming the Protectorate. The territory covers an area of over 370,000 square miles, or nearly twice the size of Spain, while its population is around 25 million.

Within the Company's organisation in Nigeria the most important district is that of Lagos. In Lagos itself which, in effect, is a shop window for all Nigeria, the Company employs some fifteen Europeans. There are district merchandise specialists for various classes of goods, a separate shipping department and, of course, the organisation necessary to deal with the clerical and administrative business of the district.

Ventures in the Lagos district are located at Ibadan (West Africa's biggest city, with nearly 350,000 inhabitants) Abeokuta, Ijebuode, Ondo, Oshogbo, and Ilorin. Some idea of the size of this district can be obtained from the fact that the distance from

A Company residence at Libreville

Libreville main shop and offices

the port at Lagos to Ilorin, the most northerly venture of the district, is roughly 240 miles, or further than the distance from Southampton to Liverpool.

The Company's organisation in Northern Nigeria is served by the district which has its headquarters at Kano, the ancient trading centre and terminus for the Sahara camel trains, now the centre of Nigeria's groundnut trade. The Kano district covers the enormous area of roughly 193,000 square miles, which is as large as Italy. The district has its main ventures situated at Makurdi and Yola on the Benue River, Bida (on the Niger), Zaria, Gusau, Sokoto, Jos, which is the centre of the Nigerian tin-mining industry, Maiduguri, Nguru, and Kano itself. Northern Nigeria has not yet reached the same level of economic and commercial development as Southern Nigeria or the Gold Coast, and every venture still carries some retail branches.

The rest of Nigeria is served by the districts of Warri (with ventures on or near the Niger at Warri, Sapele, Benin, Lokoja, and Asaba) and Port Harcourt (with ventures at Port Harcourt itself, Aba, Onitsha, Calabar and Bansara, all big palm-oil buying centres, and at Enugu). The Company has an additional venture at the port of Victoria in the British Cameroons which has a large and increasing export trade in bananas; there is also a branch inland at Kumba.

Further south, in the French Cameroons, is the district which has its headquarters at Duala, where the district agent's staff includes a depot agent. Within this district there are ventures at Yaounde (the Government headquarters), Nkongsamba, Ebolowa, and Kribi, the secondary port. A special branch at Libreville in Gaboon, where the Company owns a large area of freehold forest land, is included in the Duala organisation, although Gaboon itself comes under the French administration at Brazzaville, unlike the Cameroons, which is directly responsible to Paris. In those French territories, the trade is almost entirely wholesale, distribution being organised by European middlemen and some Syrian merchants.

Such is the administrative outline of a Company whose total annual trade in all its aspects is of the order of £20 million and which employs in Africa alone nearly 150 Europeans and upwards of 5,000 Africans. All Europeans live in Company-owned houses and both they and 'agreemented' Africans enjoy pension rights which mature at fifty-five.

In a sense, the Company's strength lies in its assistants, from whom venture agents and ultimately district agents must be recruited. Ideally, the assistant should be a young man between twenty-three and thirty, of good education, background and character. A sound knowledge of French is essential if he is to be employed in a French Colony. Other preliminary language qualifications are not necessary, but if his service takes him to Northern Nigeria he will need to learn Hausa, both in the Company's interest and his own. He must, of course, be physically fit and have a real flair for working harmoniously with Africans. Such men are not easily come by and the careful handpicking and grooming of candidates accounts in part for the strong sense of loyalty and tradition amongst the Coast staff and ensures a continuity of local experience.

In the following chapters some account is given of the kinds of merchandise and produce handled by this organisation and of the time-tested methods of operation by which the Company has attained its unique status in West Africa today.

Shop on Maloney Street, Lagos

Yaounde, from John Holt's factory

The Yaounde shop

MARKETS AND MERCHANDISE

A remarkable variety of merchandise is marketed in West Africa by the Holt organisation today. The post-war requirements of the African consumer, as well as increasing, are widening all the time and contemporary selling lines afford a most interesting comparison with the list of 'suitable goods' drawn up by John Holt in his early days on the Coast. Naturally, demands vary with Colonies. But allowing for all this and for seasonal fluctuations—most African crops are converted into cash between October and March—it can safely be stated that over the whole area the demand is constant and multifarious enough for the Company to send its buyers all over the world. The basic requirements of food and clothes are common alike to West Africa as they are to all other countries of the world; in addition, as in most other countries, there is a large and varied market for consumer merchandise of all kinds. Apart from this there is a constantly growing demand for agricultural machinery and implements, and for all kinds of equipment, mechanical, electrical and constructional for new African industries and buildings.

Variety is the keynote of the merchandise imported into this market. Add to this the fact that West African consumer tastes are in a continual process of education and it will readily be appreciated that the Company's specialists in each district have an indispensable and exacting role. Amongst other things, it is their job to examine and advise on the lists of requirements submitted by separate ventures and to pass these on to the merchandise department at Liverpool.

The merchandise department at Liverpool is responsible for the entire merchandise policy of the Company in which is incorporated, of course, the buying of the Coast requirements. Within its organisation is the buying department, divided into many buying sections each handling a certain range of goods. One section handles bulk

provisions such as flour, biscuits, salt, etc. Another takes care of general tinned provisions and conserves, a third buys wines and spirits and drinks of all kinds; other sections specialise in medicines, drugs, and perfumery; tobacco, chemicals, paints and polishes. On the hardware and machinery side of the department there are sections handling agricultural, electric, and industrial machinery and equipment; builders' supplies of all kinds; light machinery such as bicycles, typewriters, etc.; implements and tools of all types, and cutlery; enamelled and galvanised holloware, tinware, cast and pressed ironware; earthenware, china and glassware. There are many other lines too numerous to detail here but among them may be mentioned such things as carpets and linoleums, stationery, sports goods, musical instruments, fishing nets and ropes.

At the head of these sections are highly skilled and specialised buyers who are the organisational complement of the specialists on the Coast. These buyers, as has been said, are constantly travelling to many parts of the world, and in addition the Company has built up during the years a world-wide organisation of buying agencies by the appointment of first-class companies in the countries concerned, some of these being subsidiary or associated companies.

In this way a constant two-way flow of intelligence is maintained between headquarters at Liverpool and the Coast. The great strides made in both air and sea communications over the years have enormously benefited the relationship between these units and have made possible something approaching a streamlined marketing service, notwithstanding the inevitable post-war hold-ups on both sides of the ocean. Speed, both of communication and supply, is vital in markets as localised and competitive as those of West Africa, where possibly the smallest 'mark-ups' in the world dictate a rapid turnover. In the process of perfecting their merchandising organisation in West Africa, the Company has long since acquired a commercial *savoir-faire* and experience of local demands and conditions which are of real value to manufacturers looking for new markets for their products. For a considerable number of years the Company has successfully handled many sole agencies for firms of international repute.

Cloth has always been one of the main commodities in the West African trade and about a third of the Company's total merchandising business is done in textiles. For instance, Nigeria absorbs about

Cotton Prints for West African Customers

50 million yards of shirting and nearly 30 million yards of baft every year. The importance of this trade has dictated the maintenance of a separate branch of the Company's merchandise department, located at Manchester since the days when Thomas Welsh took charge of an office there in the 1890s.

This branch, in the charge of a resident director, with its own warehouse and a staff of over twenty people including designers, is almost a self-contained unit. Its buyers are always seeking suitable 'grey' cloth, which is then processed—it may be in the country of origin—according to the Company's own specifications. From the weavers, dyers, finishers and printers, cloth comes to the Manchester warehouse where it is examined and tested, made up, cut, stamped, stitched, packed in waterproof bales and delivered for shipment.

In the case of cotton prints, colours and designs are originated by the Company's own designers in accordance with African taste and fashion. As may be guessed, catering for the latter is a highly skilled business, not to say vocation. African tastes and fashions in coloured prints are lively, capricious, and independent. They are domestically prompted, not commercially imposed, and in view of the size and scale of the trade a few 'bad guesses' on the merchant's part could lose a lot of money.

The expert in time may develop a sixth sense for what his customers will approve, but this approval can never be reduced to anything like a formula. Certain pictorial symbols, such as cocks or butterflies, may be popular, but often the African will cheerfully wear them upside down, being less interested in their meaning than in the total impression of design. On the question of quality, however, he is not to be side-tracked.

In addition to this widespread and fascinating traffic in cotton prints, the Manchester unit handles the supply of 'whites and greys' (shirtings and bafts), coloured woven items, and yarns which the Africans will work on their own looms.

So far this chapter has been largely devoted to the buying of goods for West Africa. But the Company's subsidiaries in the USA and France, and its associates in South Africa, demand a wide range of merchandise for sale in their particular markets, and they look to the buying departments of the Liverpool Company to purchase all their requirements, which add not only to the range of goods bought

Ebani building

The main factory at Kano

by these departments, but more particularly to the range of qualities. As a natural result of this it is no uncommon sight in the John Holt sample rooms to see the lowest quality mass-produced article practically rubbing shoulders with products of craftsmanship and high luxury. More will be said of these other companies in a later chapter.

This brief sketch of the Company's merchandising and marketing organisation would not be complete without some attempt to set out the ideals which the Company has always striven to attain in its business dealings.

John Holt himself was a firm believer in three principles that actuated many of his generation of Victorians—namely, commercial fairplay, the personal touch, and the basic virtue of individual private endeavour. He knew that if Britain was to gain commercial influence in the world, and his own business was to be a permanent success, then those principles must be most closely observed.

It is only natural therefore that, being a family concern, subsequent generations reared in that tradition should continue unswervingly along the path upon which the founder travelled.

Some of the Company's suppliers today, though perhaps different in form or in name, sold goods to John Holt in the days of the Company's youth. Some of them indeed are still family concerns like the Company itself, and relationships on both sides have been personal and friendly.

The Company places a very high value on the permanence of these relationships and on goodwill such as this, whether with customers or suppliers. For commercialism devoid of humanity not only can hold no interest for it but indeed runs counter to its history, its tradition, and the essential family nature of its outlook.

3

THE PRODUCE TRADE

Just as when speaking of 'the merchandise trade', the import trade into West Africa is meant, so in speaking of 'the produce trade', trade in the reverse direction is implied. But where the merchandise trade is the import of consumer goods, the produce trade deals almost entirely with the export of raw materials for the world markets.

It is probably correct to say that, when the African trade first started, the purchase of produce for sale in the United Kingdom and European markets was regarded as a cheap and convenient means of remitting the proceeds of merchandise sales back to the country of origin, whereby money could be realised and turned back again into goods to be sent out to Africa.

This relationship has, however, changed with the years, until at the present time the division is almost complete, and each side of the Company's business is run on its own merits.

During the last century West African produce meant mostly the products of the palm. The first recorded shipment of palm oil was made from Benin in 1588, but it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that any appreciable trade was done in this commodity. Palm kernels themselves were not exported at all until 1860, only two years before John Holt sailed for Fernando Po.

For the next forty or fifty years palm products continued to monopolise the export business, and at the turn of the century they still accounted for about 82 per cent of the Nigerian total, with rubber taking up another 10 per cent. Trade, however, was limited by natural means of transport, namely waterways, and it was not until expansion became possible, through the opening up of roads and the building of railways, that the farmer was able to develop his production and market the result of his labours through the cheap transport which had become available to him.

From this point, however, West African exports increased rapidly. The indigenous crops consisted mainly of palm oil and oilseeds such as palm kernels, groundnuts, benniseed, and sheanuts. The increased export of oilseeds was one of the results of an increased world demand for these commodities owing to newly-discovered processes which made possible the manufacture of margarine.

At the turn of the century cocoa was becoming important. Its first introduction into the Gold Coast is believed to have been made in 1879 by an Accra man, by name Tete Kwashi, who brought it probably either from Fernando Po or San Thomé. The first export from the Gold Coast was a parcel of 80 lb. in 1891 but in the ensuing decade production rapidly increased and thereafter spread over the whole of West Africa, so that today it produces about 60 per cent of the world's cocoa. Rubber was an important product until Malaya came into prominence with plantations of *Hevea braziliensis* and the introduction of ribbed smoked sheet. The African trade, which was largely built up of varieties of *Funtumia* and *Landolphia* rubbers, produced mainly in lump form, was unable to compete with the new developments in Malaya, and eventually it became moribund, until it was revived during the Second World War.

Other new kinds of produce, however, were continually being developed and today the trade has become extremely diversified. A very considerable business is done in sundry items, which form a welcome addition to the prosperity of the country and to the cash income of the producer. Now, in addition to the big bulk lines already enumerated, trade is carried on by this Company in hides and skins, piassava, gum arabic, timber, cotton lint, cotton seed, beeswax, chillies and capsicums.

John Holt played no small part in developing the exports of West Africa during the nineteenth century and the Company continues as an important buyer and shipper of all items of West African produce which can be marketed anywhere in the world. Further, being always a buyer on the basis of the ruling world market prices, it continues to give service to the producers by providing an outlet for their surplus production.

As has been mentioned in earlier chapters, the Company is widely represented by branches scattered throughout the Gold Coast, British and French Togoland, Dahomey, Nigeria, the British and French Cameroons, and Gaboon. In the Gold Coast the main products are

cocoa, coffee and small quantities of timber; in Togoland and Dahomey, palm produce, cotton and groundnuts. In Southern Nigeria the principal trade is in palm produce, cocoa and rubber; in the North, groundnuts, benniseed, hides and skins, and gum arabic. The Cameroons produce palm kernels, palm oil, cocoa, coffee and other sundry items. In Gaboon there is no produce trade as such, but there the Company owns, as freeholders, extensive forests largely populated with okoumie (the finest peeling timber available in the world) and also other species of desirable African hardwoods.

It is perhaps opportune at this point to give a general picture of the operation of the produce trade as far as West Africa is concerned. It first of all starts by large sums of money being made available to the various districts so that they may buy their produce. This money filters out from district headquarters to ventures, from ventures out to branches and sub-branches; from there it goes into the hands of an army of middlemen, and so back until it reaches the producer, who in very many cases deals in extremely small units.

Once the money reaches the producer the reverse process begins, and so from hundreds of small producers, each contributing his quota, it reaches the middleman, and, like streams joining a river, the flow becomes increasingly greater until it eventually reaches port for shipment to its ultimate destination.

To digress for a moment, it is worth pointing out that, so far as palm kernels are concerned, these are still mainly cracked by hand by women, and that a ton of palm kernels contains between one million and one million and a quarter kernels. Some idea of the work involved may be obtained when it is realised that Nigeria's export of palm kernels alone comes to over 3 million tons per annum; also that although the Gold Coast produces anything from 270,000 to 300,000 tons of cocoa per annum, the average production from a single tree is somewhere about 2 lb. of dried cocoa per year. During the whole of this movement of produce, almost every type of transport is used—the headload, the donkey, the camel, motor transport, railway, canoe, raft, lighter, launch, river steamer—before it reaches the hold of the ocean-going vessel which carries it away from Africa.

One form of transport merits a note to itself, and that is the bicycle, which in Africa acts not only as a passenger vehicle, but as a 'beast of burden' for carrying considerable quantities of produce.

Gathering the oil-palm fruit

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ERRATUM

Page 62 line 28: For 3 million tons read 300,000 tons

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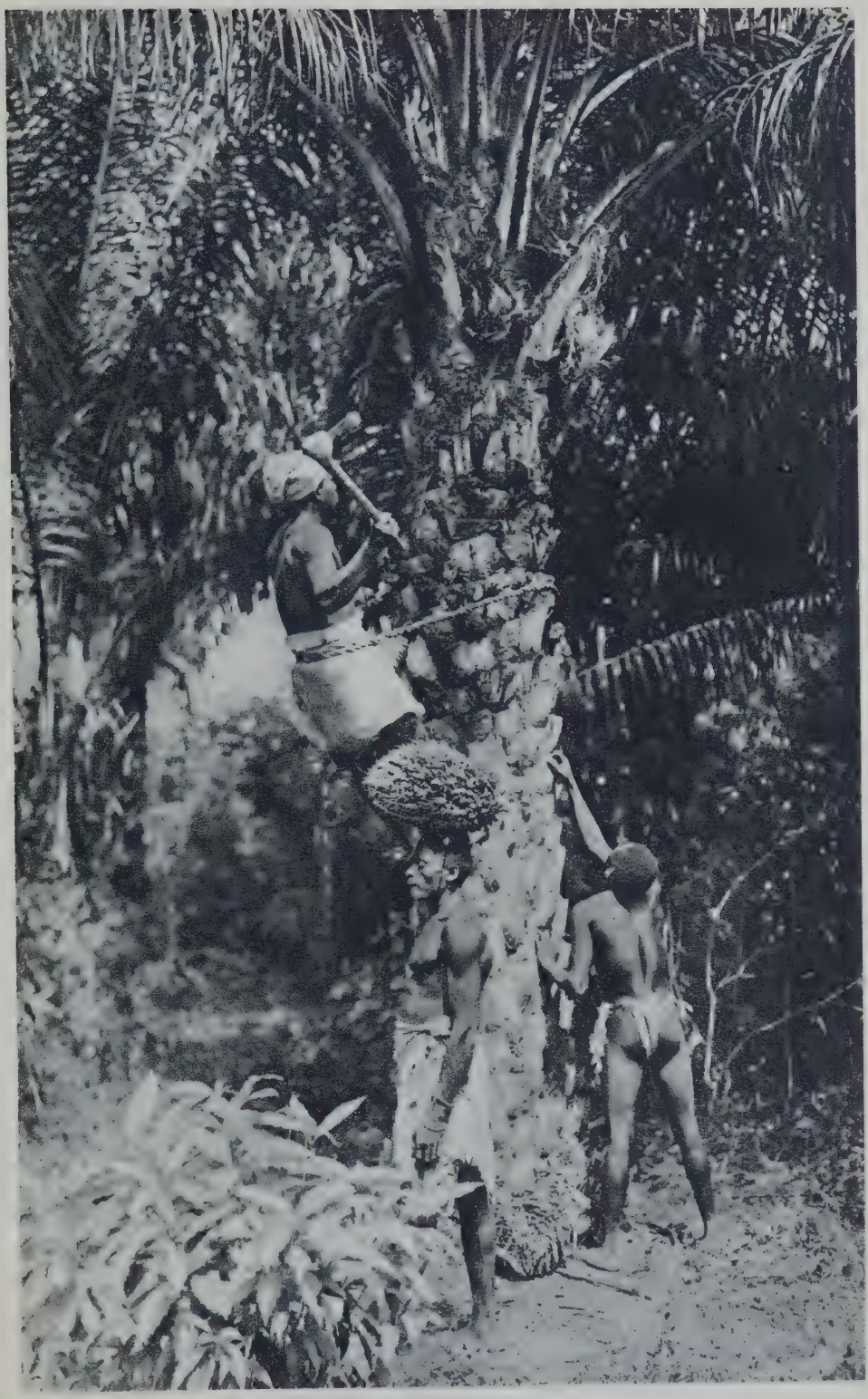

Gathering the oil-palm fruit

Cutting timber at Billagone, Gaboon

Special mention should be made of Northern Nigeria, which borders on the Sahara desert. Kano itself is possibly the oldest market in central Africa and from earliest times, camel caravans have crossed the Sahara from there to Morocco, Algiers, Senegal, and Khartoum. Even today Touaregs from the desert bring their camel trains down to carry produce from out-stations to railhead, and to carry back merchandise into the interior of the Sahara.

When the first explorers reached Morocco, they found a most desirable type of leather available for shoe manufacture, which became known as morocco leather, and this led to the development of a trade in Cordova in Spain. Thus Cordovan leather became well known throughout Europe and particularly in England in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; so much so that it eventually gave its name to the Shoemakers' Guild, the word Cordovan being corrupted into 'cordwain', from which is derived the Cordwainers' Guild. This leather, although it came out of Morocco, was in point of fact produced in Nigeria whence it had been taken by camel caravan across the Sahara, and today the native tanners in Northern Nigeria still produce the same type of leather. One development of the Company has been the establishment of a subsidiary—Holt's Nigerian Tanneries Limited—which operates a tannery in Kano, with a view to continuing the production of this leather under modern conditions without changing its general desirable characteristics. This is the beginning of what should be an interesting and promising experiment in setting up a local secondary industry.

Not unnaturally, the war years have left their mark on the produce trade in West Africa, and during the war the main products from British West Africa—palm oil, oilseeds and cocoa—were bought by the merchants as buying agents for the West African Produce Control Board in London. After the war the trade was not handed back to the merchants to resume their role as principals in the buying and marketing of the various crops, but Marketing Boards were instituted to deal with cocoa in the Gold Coast and with cocoa, palm products, groundnuts, benniseed and cotton in Nigeria. The Company along with other merchants continues to act as licensed buying agents of the Boards for these commodities. Although the Company is no longer a free marketing agent, the goods are handled with the same care and the same regard for quality whilst they are in its possession as they were in days of freer trade.

Unloading salt at Duala

The Company's wharf at Duala

JOHN HOLT LINE LIMITED

For many people today the name 'John Holt' is as much associated with ships as with merchanting. This is not surprising when it is remembered that the seafaring activities of the Company go back to its earliest days. From that day in 1868 when John Holt acquired the 65-ton, two-masted, fore-and-aft schooner *Maria*, he became a merchant shipowner. His small fleet of schooners, cutters and the 60-ton steamboat *Pioneer* (which had previously been used by Livingstone for his expedition up the River Zambesi), while employed principally between Fernando Po and the African mainland, also traded up and down the mainland coast. The major part of ocean-going carriage was performed by chartered sailing ships and steamers while, in addition, some of his cargo was carried by regular liners operating the West African service.

It was not until 1907 that the Company acquired its first ocean-going steamer. She was the s.s. *Balmore*, a ship of 1,272 tons gross and bought primarily for the purpose of servicing John Holt's Niger River trade. In 1910 an even more decisive step was taken towards the establishment of a regular ocean-going fleet by the placing of orders for the construction of two steamers, the *Jonathan Holt* and the *Thomas Holt*. These two ships, each of 1,522 tons gross, were built to the Company's own specification, based on practical experience of maritime operations in tropical Africa. An outstanding feature was the provision of close-mesh copper gauze coverings to all doorways, side port openings, windows, skylights, ventilators and passages. This protection, while permitting the necessary ventilation, prevented the entry of the disease-carrying mosquito. These ships were the first to trade to the West Coast of Africa equipped with this special protection. Its installation was in accordance with the suggestions of Sir Ronald (then Major) Ross whose discovery of the source of malarial infection about twelve years earlier had greatly

encouraged the inland penetration of Nigeria. As these ships were designed to cross the bars at the mouths of the navigable rivers in Nigeria they were constructed of shallow draught. In the 1914-18 War they were requisitioned by the British Government and one of them, the s.s. *Jonathan Holt*, was torpedoed off the south-west coast of Ireland. Fortunately there was no loss of life.

After the war the Company was able to resume the building of ships in which their own ideas, particularly in the spheres of cargo stowage and handling together with passenger and crew accommodation, were incorporated. A further innovation introduced to the West African trade by the Company was the provision of single-berth cabins for seamen. Between 1926 and 1938 the fleet was enlarged to its present complement of five ships and consisted of the steam ships *John Holt* of 3,815 tons gross, *Jonathan Holt* of 3,793 tons gross, *Godfrey B. Holt* of 3,563 tons gross, *Thomas Holt* of 3,580 tons gross and *Robert L. Holt* of 2,909 tons gross. The first four of these ships were named after the founder of the Company and his brothers while the last was named after the second son of John Holt, who was Chairman at that time and holder of the office from 1917 to 1947. These ships maintained a regular fortnightly service between Liverpool and the West Coast of Africa where the ports of call were Takoradi, Accra, Lome, Cotonou, Lagos, Port Harcourt, Victoria, Duala and Warri, which was the terminal port of the service. Cargo and passenger space were used exclusively for the Company's own merchandise, produce, and coast staff.

War again intervened and in 1939 the ships of the fleet were requisitioned by the British Government and operated under the aegis of the Liner Requisition Scheme. The *John Holt* carried over a thousand Free French officers and men to Gold Coast ports, and both she and the *Robert L. Holt* assisted in the evacuation of troops, munitions and stores from St. Nazaire in June 1940. In the course of this hazardous operation the *John Holt* rescued 1,100 survivors from the Cunarder *Lancastria* which was sunk by German bombs. A large number of these unfortunate men were picked up naked and black with oil. With these survivors on board, the *John Holt* found her way through a minefield and landed them at Plymouth the following day. For this and other exploits, the Master, Captain Harry Fuller, was invested with the Order of the British Empire at Buckingham Palace in September 1942.

s.s. Godfrey B. Holt *loading oil*

s.s. Jonathan Holt *and s.s.* John Holt *at Warri, 1938*

When West Africa's natural resources became of first importance in the national war effort, the ships were restored to the West African trade, where they operated on more familiar but no less perilous routes. The year 1941 was a black one for the Company's ships. The *Jonathan Holt* was torpedoed off the west coast of Ireland on 24th February. She sank almost immediately and there were only three survivors. On 28th July the *Robert L. Holt* was presumed lost after being gravely overdue and it was not until after the war that the Admiralty was able to inform the Company that she had been lost south of Madeira. The Commodore of the convoy, his staff of six and the ship's crew of 50 were never seen again. On 24th September the *John Holt* was torpedoed 300 miles south of the Azores and sunk, one military gunner losing his life.

In December 1942 a new s.s. *John Holt* was launched to follow in the wake of her famous predecessor and the keel of another *Jonathan Holt* was laid. Two years later, on 5th March 1944 in a position 60 miles south of the Opobo River in Nigeria, this *John Holt* (the third of that name) was hit by two torpedoes and sank in four minutes. The enemy submarine surfaced and took the Master, Captain C. G. Hime, and one passenger, Mr. S. H. Elliott, as prisoners. These two men subsequently lost their lives in a most tragic reversal when the enemy submarine was attacked and sunk by Allied forces.

Such were the vicissitudes of war suffered by the Company's ships. It is pleasing to record that the services rendered by the ship's personnel were recognised by the awards of the OBE to Captain Fuller and Chief Engineer A. Meredith, the MBE to Chief Engineers T. M. Harper and S. Clensy and the BEM to ten members of the ships' crews. In many instances the ships' Captains were appointed convoy Commodore and Vice-Commodore and carried out those duties in an efficient manner. This was exemplified by the bringing into port of a North Atlantic convoy by Captain A. Kennedy who assumed control after the ships of both the Commodore and Vice-Commodore had broken down. This feat brought forth the thanks of the Admiralty.

In 1945 orders were placed by the Company for two new steamers, the *John Holt* and *Robert L. Holt*, both of 3,818 tons gross. These two, together with the *Jonathan Holt* and the pre-war *Thomas Holt* and *Godfrey B. Holt* brought the fleet back to a strength of five ships.

The two new ships, built by Cammell Laird & Company Limited who also built the other three ships of the fleet, embodied the most up-to-date features of a designing and structural experience extending over a period of nearly forty years of steamship operation in the West African trade. Speed, cargo spaces and handling gear are the most efficient for the trade; they are air-conditioned throughout and designed to accommodate navigating officers on the bridge deck and engineer officers on the saloon deck.

January 1950 marked a new chapter in the history of the ships with the formation of a new Company, John Holt Line Limited. It will have been observed that during the war the Company's previously interdependent functions of merchanting and shipowning had, by force of circumstance, been separated through the requisitioning of the ships. They had been placed on open berth and after the end of requisitioning, continued to operate as common carriers. In that role, while carrying a share of the Company's cargoes and employees in common with all other ships on the berths, a large part of their capacity was absorbed by the West African trade in general. It was therefore deemed advisable to operate the fleet's future activities by means of a separate subsidiary company so that shippers might have the advantage of dealing with a shipping company *per se*.

The five ships of the new Line, which has been accepted as a member of the West African Lines Conference, now operate over the range of ports in West Africa from Dakar to Lobito in Angola. They load and discharge at all the berth ports in the United Kingdom and North Continent. Upwards of 200 men are employed on the ships, each of which normally makes four round trips yearly. The total distance steamed in a year is approximately 200,000 miles.

Mention must be made of the river fleet in Nigeria which was built up to serve the River Niger stations as far north as Baro and, to the east, along the River Benue to Yola, a distance of some 900 miles inland. This fleet, which is based on the port of Warri, no longer belongs to the Company as it was sold in 1949 but John Holt & Co. (Liverpool) Ltd. continue to manage it on behalf of the new owners and it operates under the name of Holts Transport Limited. Ten steam-driven stern-wheeler towing units, two steam tugs and 50 barges of varying capacities up to a maximum of 150 tons comprise the fleet. A normal unit is a stern-wheeler with two barges. All river craft are manned by Africans, the crew of a stern-wheeler being

River steamers at Warri

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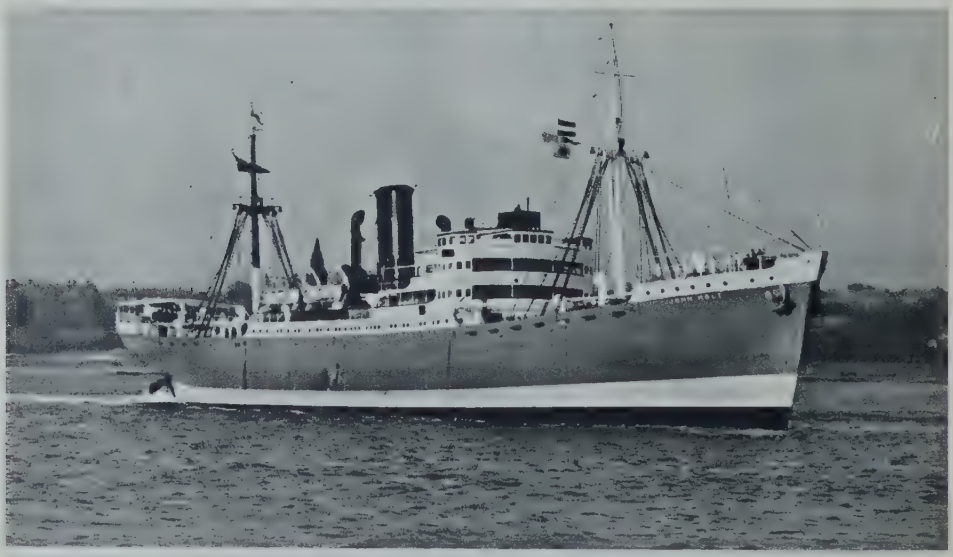
s.s. Jonathan Holt *at Lagos, 1938*

14. Coal from the Nigerian Colliery Board's mines at Udi is used as fuel for the power craft and bunkering facilities are provided by the laying down of coal dumps at various points along the two rivers.

The River Niger is navigable without difficulty for nine months of the year but operations are restricted during the low-water season from April to June. The River Benue is navigable for only approximately three months each year and the evacuation of accumulated produce stocks, together with the upward carriage of merchandise, calls for a major effort by any river fleet over this short period of time.

At the port of Warri, Holts Transport Limited own deepwater wharves comprising both fixed wharfage and floating pontoons where ocean steamers of up to 400 feet in length can be accommodated. There is also ample warehouse space and, to provide the high standard of maintenance necessary to keep the river fleet in a state of operating efficiency, modern marine engineering workshops have been built. These workshops are under the control of two European engineers and are able to undertake all kinds of mechanical work including electric welding. They are also used for limited repair work on ocean steamers. A slipway 320 feet long and capable of taking craft of up to 100 tons provides facilities for repairs and maintenance to underwater sections of craft. To provide skilled craftsmen in the workshops and engineers for the river power craft, African apprentices are accepted and trained in all branches of mechanical engineering.



s.s. John Holt, *launched 1946*

A stern-wheeler as used on the Niger

The slipway at Warri

5

OUTLOOK FOR TOMORROW

There was no fighting in West Africa between 1939 and 1945, as there had been in the earlier war, but the effects of the struggle on that area were far more drastic and profound. The loss of the natural resources of Burma, Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies threw a tremendous responsibility on West Africa. As well as having to accelerate the production of such essential raw materials as tin, bauxite, manganese and iron ore, it had to keep the ships filled with palm produce and groundnuts (used for such diverse but equally important wartime needs as margarine, cattle-cake and explosives), with rubber and timber. Nor have these responsibilities ceased with the war. Post-war economic stringencies made both Nigeria and the Gold Coast of the utmost importance to the sterling area as earners and savers of dollars.

Moreover, in order to conserve precious shipping space, these Colonies had to learn a greater self-sufficiency. Above all, they had to adapt themselves to the function of an international crossroads of both sea and air between the East and West. To do all this they had to develop their communications and transport, their constructional engineering, housing and electrification. That all this meant nothing less than a revolution in tropical economy was recognised by the Government when in the very middle of the war they instigated the Colonial Development and Welfare Act—the commercial good sense of which would have gratified John Holt himself. It meant an important new phase in African requirements, a new range and scale of both consumer and industrial markets.

One result of the major supply and strategic role forced on the West African Colonies by the war is that they have ceased to be the Cinderella of the British Commonwealth. For all the economic and social developments which had taken place there since the beginning of the century, the people of Britain as a whole were little more

Surf-boats at Accra, Gold Coast

Market Scene at Kano, Northern Nigeria

interested in these Colonies in 1939 than they had been in the nineteenth century. Then the public conscience had been content to leave matters to the missionaries and traders, and even the latter were generally misrepresented as 'palm-oil ruffians' until Mary Kingsley spoke out on their behalf. But the war made people aware of West Africa. It is significant that since 1945 scores of ex-servicemen have applied to the Company for employment in that once almost forgotten continent.

This, of course, has not been the only impact of the war upon the Company's West African policy and prospects. Some other effects have already been noted in earlier chapters. The Company's ships, for instance, have remained on open berths. More importantly, the post-war trend towards African industrialisation and self-sufficiency, towards local production and processing generally, has not only been endorsed but substantially furthered by the Company. Encouragement has gone beyond increasing the imports of machinery and constructional materials. In Nigeria, for instance, which has many home industries, some of which are long-established, the Company has interests in tanning, stationery manufacturing, brewing, and building contracting.

Of equal significance is the Company's policy, referred to in a previous chapter, of encouraging and materially assisting wherever possible the spread of African retail distribution. The increasing promotion of Africans to assistant managerial posts within the Company is another manifestation of the same policy. Whatever may be the future of British West Africa the Company foresees no limit to its own stay in West Africa as a friendly partner in the exchange of trade between countries whose economic links and mutual needs will always outlast politics. To this end it has every confidence in the genuine goodwill first planted by John Holt and cultivated with the same practical goodsense ever since.

But perhaps the most significant aspect of the Company's post-war progress is the broadening of its horizons beyond West Africa. From West African merchanting the Company is now moving gradually towards international merchanting, and a mutual trade between the U.K. Company and its associates in three important spheres provides a solid basis for this. Since the war associated and subsidiary companies have been established in the Union of South Africa, the USA and France. These companies came into

Main premises at Accra

Company's bungalow at Ibadan

being as a direct result of hostilities and the consequent reshuffle of world trading factors. The Company had previously had buyers and buying agencies in South Africa and throughout Europe and the Americas. The complications of the wartime or immediate post-war supply situation made some agencies in some areas of particular importance.

Thus before the war, all the marketing for those French Colonies in which the Company was represented was done from Liverpool and Manchester. There was no great demand for French merchandise (mainly luxury goods) in these Colonies. But after the war, France's temporary exchange shortages obliged her to keep virtually all Colonial trade within her own confines, by a system of currency and merchandise controls. Accordingly, the Company set up a buying agency in Paris in August 1945 to cope with this new situation, though its buying was still done under a consolidated directive from Liverpool. Staff had to be trained in French business methods. In September 1948 the agency became a Company with the title of John Holt (Overseas) & Cie. This Company has in addition assumed the traditional John Holt role of general merchants, importing into France many kinds of manufactured goods and raw produce, and likewise exporting French products to other countries.

In the USA the Company had transacted a large proportion of its business since 1915 through a firm of agents in New York, but in 1947 this firm was acquired by the Company and became John Holt & Co. Inc.

Expansion followed swiftly and, while continuing to supply as hitherto the dollar commodities required by the parent company in West Africa and to sell the produce of West Africa for which there is an American market, John Holt & Co. Inc. has developed an important trade in the distribution and sale of merchandise in the USA. Its distribution network covers the United States and the lines it handles are many, though it particularly specialises in fine china and glassware, earthenware and dressed leather. Most of these goods are of British manufacture. In addition to importing manufactured goods, it also imports the raw produce of overseas countries for sale in America.

It is perhaps natural that with a world dollar shortage the emphasis here has been laid on John Holt & Co. Inc. as importers, but the export of American manufactured goods is equally a prime

concern, and their buyers are in close touch with the best sources of supply in this respect. A thriving two-way trade with many parts of the world is thus being built up, which includes areas as near to the home continent as the Caribbean, and as remote as East Asia.

In the Union of South Africa an associated Company—John Holt & Co. (Pty.) Ltd.—was established in Cape Town in March 1948 to take over the business hitherto carried on by a branch of the Company, and now operates on the same lines as its parallel concerns in Paris and New York.

It continues to act as the Liverpool Company's representative for the purchase of goods for West Africa and the sale of West African products in the Union, but is also taking an increasing share in the general import and export trade of South Africa. A substantial interest in the wholesale textile and clothing business has been acquired by the purchase of Markman S. & A. (Pty.) Ltd., an established concern with headquarters in Port Elizabeth and a team of travellers covering the whole of the Union. Close commercial relations have also been established with Government departments, and important contracts for the sale of timber, machinery and equipment have been obtained. A branch office in Johannesburg is well placed to deal promptly with tenders issued by the various government offices.

On the export side, John Holt & Co. (Pty.) Ltd. handles most of the raw materials and manufactured goods produced by South Africa and has particularly close connections with the flourishing fishing industry of the south-west coast, whence canned fish and other fish products find a ready market in many parts of the world.

These are important and in a sense revolutionary signs of progress. Undoubtedly they constitute a notable landmark in the Company's history. It is not difficult to imagine that this second—or 'world'—phase will be at least as momentous as the first, the West African phase. Not that this first phase is to be written off as merely 'past history'; the spirit of John Holt, kept continuously alive by succeeding family generations, still shows itself in the way in which the Company is meeting the challenge of changing times in West Africa. It is this family tradition which ensures a continuity between the two phases. Standing midway between them, and looking towards a larger horizon than John Holt envisaged from Fernando Po, it would be entirely fitting to end this little book with a quotation from Byron: 'The best prophet of the future is the past.'

W. WEST AFRICA
LAKE CHAD
Sokoto
Nguru
Gusau
KANO
Maiduguri
R. NIGER
Zaria
NIGERIA
Kaduna
Jos
Bida
Yola
TOGO
DAHOMEY
GOLD COAST
R. BENUE
Ilorin
Oshogbo
Ibadan
Lokoja
Makurdi
Bohicon
Abeokuta
Ijebuodo
Ondo
Hohoe
Porto Novo
Quidah
LAGOS
Benin
Asaba
Enugu
Kumasi
Nsawam
Sapele
Onitsha
Tarkwa
ACCRA
WARRI
Aba
HARCOURT
Calabar
Nkongsamba
Bonny
Opobo
Qua Ibo
Victoria
DOUALA
Yaounde
CAMEROONS
Kribi
Ebolowa
Atlantic
Ocean
RIO MUNI
PRINCE'S I.
Elobey I.
Corisco I.
Libreville
EQUATOR
ST. THOMAS I.
Cape Lopez
ANNOBON I.
GABON
Sette Cama
FRENCH EQUATORIAL AFRICA
R. CONGO
BELGIAN CONGO
Brazzaville
Leopoldville
Matadi
Ambriz
ANGOLA
REITZ
AREA OF MAP SHOWN IN RELATION TO REST OF AFRICA
N
W
E
S
TRADING AREA IN WEST AFRICA
COTTON
COCOA
COAL
GROUNDNUTS
GOLD
RUBBER
HIDES & SKINS
MANGANESE
TIMBER
TIN
PALM OIL & KERNELS
COMPANY'S DISTRICT HEADQUARTERS
MILES 0 100 200 300 400

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MERCHANT ADVENTURE --

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